



Experienced climbers tackle the cable walk at Southfield's Civic Center Park, Evergreen at Civic Center Drive.

Play places where kids' minds fly



By Kathy Parrish
staff writer

He designed Southfield's newest play lot, but William Walenczak admits there's a great deal he won't know about the wood and tire structure until kids take it over.

The "starship" has 1,100 square feet of wood deck, a shaded sandbox, six slides, eight swings, ladders and "whatever else they discover" said Walenczak, who's as eager to whoosh down the tornado wave slide as the neighborhood kids.

"It's been fun watching it grow," added the superintendent of landscape design and forestry, parks and recreation. "I'm learning lots of things about it."

Scheduled to open Memorial Day weekend, Southfield's Bedford Woods Park is one of several Detroit area play lots designed to spur children's imagination.

Concrete playgrounds with swings that just go back and forth are being replaced by wood and tire structures mounted on soft surfaces like sand or wood chips. Modern tire swings shoot out in all directions, letting youngsters twist, tilt and turn.

Called "challenge" and "creative" playgrounds, builders say they not only allow more imagination but keep kids more physically fit. Promoters also say they're safer, blend better into the landscape and are just plain more fun.

"THE THING that was missing in playgrounds was the chance to let imagination run. There was motor activity, but not creative play," explained landscape architect John Lesniak, whose Royal Oak firm designed many of the area's new playgrounds. He and partner Jack Anderson built Southfield's Civic Center Play Place in 1976 and in 1978 completed The Playscape on Belle Isle, Detroit.

"Today's playgrounds allow play children are comfortable with," added Lesniak, who aims at stimulating imagination, providing graduated challenges and developing coordination.

Modeled after structures at Ontario Place in Toronto and Sea World in Aurora, Ohio, wood playgrounds appeared in the Detroit area about seven years ago.

Large units are now in play in Detroit, Birmingham, Northville, Royal Oak, Southfield, Sterling Heights, Troy and West Bloomfield, as well as other communities. Most feature wood climbers with slides, fire poles, ladders and steps built into them. The play areas have balance beams, logs to roll, swings, bridges and cable walks.

Suspension bridges are popular in Southfield parks, where they have become almost a trademark. "Kids like to run up and jump on them," explained Walenczak, who has two or three other play lots in the works.

"Play lots are well received by our citizens. If people didn't use them, we wouldn't build them."

Since kids usually come to parks with adults, several areas feature picnic tables, benches and even physical fitness courses.

MUNICIPAL CUTBACKS have forced many cities to curtail park projects. "The big thing has to be maintenance," explained Lesniak, who has seen several projects put on the back burner recently.

"The municipality has to check the nuts and bolts and they're cutting back."

He thinks one solution is to mix old and new park equipment and is pleased that major manufacturers are now offering wood units. These come in pieces and can be put together in a variety of ways.

"Now all communities can budget these things," said the landscape architect, who has learned to watch children at play before designing for them. "Before they couldn't."

"With limited ground space, you can put four or five different activities off one piece," said James M. O'Neil, president of Michigan Playground and Recreation Equipment Inc. in Birmingham.

Troy has "hybridized" playgrounds, adding new structures to old equipment in areas like Boulton Park. Bill Need, Troy's superintendent of public grounds, said the wood units are more expensive but offer more "playability."

"IF PEOPLE use it how expensive can it be?" asked Need. "They're using it more — adults as well as kids. The timber leaves children more creativity in play. It's a fort, castle, they can climb all over it. But a swing is just a swing."

Tony Klain, manager of Maybury

State Park, agrees. The Northville park put in four pieces of wood play equipment last summer.

"It's a little more expensive, but certainly provides increased creative play activity," explained Klain. "We'd be glad to expand it anytime."

Desire for physical fitness is part of the enthusiasm for modern structures, which offer more ways to use the body. Troy Jaycees, who constructed a unit in Jaycee Park, plan to add another to be used by handicapped persons as well. "These climbing devices help



Wendy Wolf of West Bloomfield spins a tire swing off in all directions at Southfield's Civic Center Park.

strengthen regular as well as handicapped bodies," Need explained.

While concerned about providing adventure, city officials also must worry about safety. Some of the new structures rise higher than the metal slides they replaced, but promoters say safety is designed into them so that youngsters who shouldn't tackle them won't.

"BECAUSE there are so many things children can do, they don't seem to be taking chances like they do on regular swings and slides" said Troy's Need. "There are just so many options."

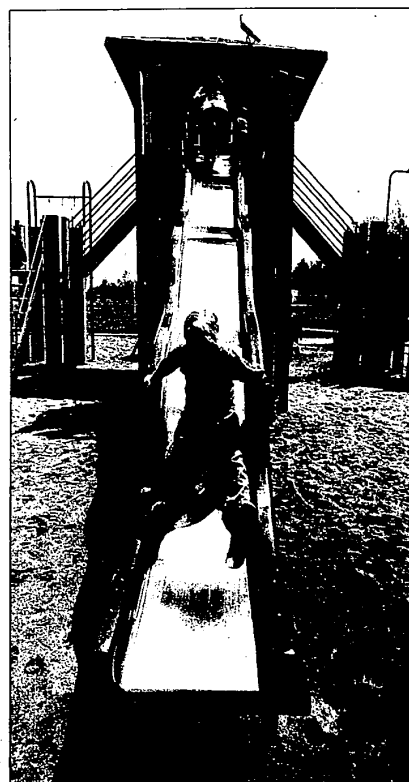
Southfield's Walenczak said the city has had only one law suit over a cable ride which is no longer in the Civic Center play lot. "Safety is first with us and so far we've been lucky," said the park

designer, who gets advice from residents on hazards. "Mothers call us and make suggestions."

Lesniak is concerned that federal regulations will curtail the adventure in parks. "Cities have to be concerned about liability, everyone is turning to a lawyer," he said. "It's put a damper on being ultra-creative. It means we have to design a little bit harder."

Rochester's superintendent of parks and recreation is sticking with brightly colored concrete for park projects. Animals made of the sturdy material stand in a sand box in the city's municipal park.

"They're more or less maintenance free and have no moving parts — potential amputation zones," explained Bruce Austin.



Kelly Drozda, 6, of Troy bumps down Boulton Park's wave slide.

Brightly colored concrete forms are the focal point of Rochester Municipal Park. Laura Hurwitz, 3, of Rochester and Sarah Koenig, 3, of Waterford scale a climber.