

October 20, 2010

Dear Community Services Commission,

I am writing to address Agenda Item #3 - Adventure Playground Status Report - on the October 20, 2010.

I commend the staff for the thorough review and analysis of the current state of the Adventure Playground. I applaud the city's responsiveness to the citizens to try to restore this unique treasure to the city. The fact that you are devoting staff resources to Irvine Adventure Playground is a good sign. The analysis of the site submitted by the Principal Planner is extremely professional and detailed.

There are only 3 existing Adventure Playgrounds in the United States: Irvine, Huntington Beach (only open during the summer), and Berkeley, CA.

I wanted to highlight that it's important to **step back from the specifics and history of this case** to recognize the core concept behind Adventure Playgrounds. These types of playgrounds are popular in Europe where there's not such a concern for liability. These spaces provide more of an opportunity for unstructured, but supervised play in opposition to traditional playgrounds.

Risk and Liability

In the past, children benefited from these free play experiences in our backyards or the wild spaces in our neighborhoods. At the same time playground codes evolved to become more restrictive; child's play evolved to become virtually risk-free. I say "virtually" because there is always inherent risk in playing. My dad always used to say "You play, you pay." Skinned knees, scrapes and bruises, and even the occasional broken bone are the stuff of childhood. It happens. No code is going to stop accidents from happening. Many parents are willing to accept that risk by signing liability waivers.

Alternatives

I believe that there are **alternatives to consider beyond the scope of the status report**. You could still have the Adventure Playground meet safety standards without preserving the specific structures within the walls. If you tore down all the unsafe structures, graded the site for drainage, and provided an accessible path throughout the site -- leaving the rest of the space empty for free play then it would still be considered an Adventure Playground.

The space should be open for the children to create and the structures are supposed to be temporary. I can provide countless examples of safe ways to fill the space:

Imagination Playground in a Box (www.imaginationplayground.org)





Photos Courtesy of:

- Creative Start Learning (<http://creativestartlearning.blogspot.com/>)
- Head Start Body Start Blog (<http://www.aahperd.org/headstartbodystart/>)
- Let the Children Play (<http://progressiveearlychildhoodeducation.blogspot.com/>)

More Resources

- **Darell Hammond, Chief Executive Officer of KaBOOM**, visited adventure playgrounds in Europe earlier this year. He wrote ["I'm Gonna Sue! How Lawsuits Are Depriving Our Children of Play"](#) (Huffington Post, May 2010) with reference to the wonder these amazing adventure playgrounds provide for our children.
- Read about the importance of adventure playgrounds on [Adventure Playgrounds: A Children's World in the City website](#). Lia Sutton also has a wealth of links and research on her site.
- Listen to ["Adventure Playgrounds a Dying Breed in the U.S."](#) from NPR.org (March, 2006).
- The **Project for Public Spaces** website runs down ["Elements of a Successful Playspace"](#) and says: *"Experts often recommend adventure playgrounds, which let different ages find their own "level" of activity which suits them best. Older children will actually discourage younger ones from activities too risky for their age."* In fact, they go on to point out: *"Adventure playgrounds are often said to be less dangerous than traditional playgrounds because participants are more alert (Bartlett, CERG)."*
- [Berkeley's Adventure Playground](#) website
- [Huntington Beach Adventure Playground](#) website
- [Urban Adventure Playgrounds: The Coolest Places You Probably Never Played As a Kid](#) (WebUrbanist, 2007)
- [The War on Children's Playgrounds: By trying to make kids' spaces safe and risk-free, are we taking all the fun out of growing up?](#) (Lenore Skenazy on Salon, May 2010)
- [NaturalPlaygrounds.com](#)
- Do a Google search for "Loose Parts" playgrounds

Recommendations to Council

Community Services Commission should consider a recommendation to City Council to designate that the parcel for the Adventure Playground stay consistent with the spirit of these types of playgrounds while acknowledging safety standards and fiscal constraints.

Irvine is designated a Playful City USA by KaBOOM's National Campaign for Play. I'm sure KaBOOM would be more than willing to help with grant applications and suggestions on how to move forward. A team from KaBOOM recently toured Adventure Playgrounds in Europe and is helping to gain support for a new adventure playground in Mercer Island, WA.

I personally would even go so far as to spearhead a movement to make Adventure Playgrounds exempt from meeting the same codes as traditional playgrounds.

There's so much in our lives that's structured, especially for kids. It's important to hold on to this concept and provide a clean slate for the children of Orange County to fill with their imagination in a staffed outdoor environment.

My background and qualifications:

- I'm a **UCI** alumni with a degree in Psychology and Social Behavior from the School of Social Ecology.
- I write the "Play Mom" column for **OCFamily.com**
- I am editor/owner of **FunOrangeCountyParks.com** where I've journaled over 160 playgrounds from the neighborhood, city, county, and state levels -- and make it my mission to promote play and family outdoor time.
- Most importantly, I'm a **mom** to an 8 year old boy and 5 year old girl. I want them to experience free play at a nationally-recognized Adventure Playground.
- I was named **KaBOOM Playmaker of the Month** in December 2008 and am currently working with them to develop Playground Blogger Webinar to train others to become active promoting play in their community.

Thank you for your time. I'm sorry I couldn't be here to present in person. If you have any questions or would like me to provide you with links to even more informative examples and websites, please contact me any time.

Sincerely,

Michele Whiteaker
949-466-3959

**ATTENTION:
DONNA SMITH**

FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMISSION

MEETING

CITY OF IRVINE

OCTOBER 20, 2010