

# Medford park would showcase 'natural' playground

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Mail Tribune

January 06, 2011 2:00 AM

A new city park with a "natural" playground could take shape at the intersection of East McAndrews Road and Chablis Terrace in east Medford as early as this summer, parks and recreation officials say.

The 14-acre Oregon Hills Park on city land hugged by East McAndrews, Chablis and Tamarack Drive is already home to native oak trees with broad canopies as well as two converging tributaries of Lazy Creek.

A design approved by the Parks Commission would transform the property into a natural wonderland for children and a recreation magnet for nearby residents who don't have a neighborhood park, said Brian Sjothun, city parks and recreation director.

A natural playground — a trend that incorporates elements such as sand and water to inspire play rather than traditional playground equipment — is part of the design.

"It's not like the playgrounds in any of the parks now," Sjothun said. "It's not something you can go out and buy. There are natural areas with a little running water through sand so that kids can build sand castles. It's designed to let kids get dirty and use their imaginations versus structured play (in a traditional playground)."

A water play area in the playground will include an old-fashioned hand crank which children can use to pump water up into a bucket. Then, the bucket dumps the water on the ground. There also will be a climbing sculpture, the design of which is yet to be determined, Sjothun said.

Natural playgrounds are the latest trend in sustainable design, including more native grass areas that don't need irrigation, which means less maintenance for the city, Sjothun said.

In addition, a 10-by-10 trestle, called the Shady Oak Discovery Platform, will give people in wheelchairs and walkers a close-up view of the park's native oak trees.

Other plans for the park include a trail system, exercise stations, picnic shelters, rest rooms, a parking area and possibly a basketball or volleyball court. Medford Public Works will build two storm-water detention ponds holding 30-acre feet of water on the south end of the park. The ponds will help slow the flow of water to Bear Creek in the event of a 100-year flood, defined as four inches of rain in a 24-hour period for that area.

The city already has \$600,000 to build the nearly \$1 million park and hopes to win a local government grant in the amount of \$200,000 to \$300,000 from the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department to build the natural playground portion of the park.

The grant will be awarded in mid-July.

"If we don't get the grant, we will still move forward with the project," Sjothun said.

In February or March, parks and recreation will apply for a conditional use permit to build the park, Sjothun said. Construction could begin in late summer of this year, he said.

The park was designed through public input, park employees' efforts and landscape architectural firm LandCurrent of Eugene.

The city maintains a total of 2,391 acres of parks, natural areas and greenways for its population of nearly 80,000.

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