

Accessibility Standards – New Parks and Playground Structures

ISSUE

This report responds to an inquiry requesting information on opportunities and potential policy changes that would be required to increase the levels of accessibility standards in Parks; in particular the playgrounds and play structures (structure and ground surfacing) that are installed and maintained in park locations throughout Saskatoon.

BACKGROUND

City Council, at its Regular Business Meeting held on November 30, 2020, resolved:

“Whereas some parks and playgrounds in developing neighbourhoods are being built to a higher accessibility standard than is currently mandated for new parks and playgrounds in Saskatoon.

That Administration report back about opportunities and potential policy changes to ensure that new parks and playground structures are built to a higher standard of accessibility in our city.”

CURRENT STATUS

Accessible Guidelines, Standards, and Specifications for Playground Structures

Accessible Playgrounds are defined within the City’s Park Development Guidelines as playgrounds built in accordance with the Accessible Playspaces in Canada Guidebook and that comply with the Accessibility Action Plan approved, in principle, by City Council in 2008.

Minimum accessibility requirements are identified in the City’s Standard Construction Specifications: Parks to comply with Children’s Playspaces and Equipment Standard: AN/CSA-Z614-14 (or most current edition). The application of these standards is ensured through the park design review and construction inspection processes managed by the City’s Landscape Design and Development Program, within the Parks Department. When reviewing submissions of a playground structure, elements that consist of accessible and inclusive design are considered so that structures can encourage engagement and participation by children of all abilities. Examples of playground structures that meet the City’s current minimum accessibility requirements can be found in Appendix 1.

While minimum accessible playground structure requirements have been identified within the City’s Park Development Guidelines and the Standard Parks Specifications, there is no maximum accessibility standard identified. The Administration recognizes there is a gap of accessibility standards in parks in developing neighbourhoods versus existing neighborhoods. Currently, the Parks and Recreation levy provides sufficient funding to meet the minimum size, design and required accessible components for play structures, however if a private developer is willing to fund the additional capital cost associated with exceeding the minimum accessible playground requirements, they are

able to implement a higher accessibility standard within their park development project. Over time, this could lead to a growing gap of accessibility standards in parks in developing neighbourhoods versus existing neighborhoods. The challenges facing the City's asset management plans, with some playground structures being built to a higher-level standard than currently required, is first and foremost it creates inconsistencies in new parks, and there is additional funding required not only for ongoing maintenance but also to replace these playground structures at the end of their useful life.

Playground Structure Inventory

Appendices 2 and 3 identify 187 City-maintained playgrounds located throughout Saskatoon with varying levels of accessibility, ranked from 1 to 4, with 4 being the highest level of accessibility. The average accessibility rating across all playgrounds in Saskatoon is 1.75. This inventory does not include the significant number of playgrounds owned by the school boards, on school board property.

It is important to note there are various playground structure design elements that can offer varying levels of accessibility (partial accessibility) based on the type of disability. For example, a play structure or component with bright colors and marking of transition areas provides a higher level of accessibility to a child or caregiver with vision or sensory challenges. Ramps make play components more accessible for all ages and abilities, and the layout of the playground area creating space between play elements makes components more accessible for those with mobility challenges. Another example, rubberized surface material will make a playground much more accessible to those with mobility challenges.

In November 2008, City Council approved a playground structure accessibility strategy where at least one fully accessible destination playground structure would be provided in each of the four quadrants of Saskatoon. Since that time, the City has expanded its inventory of fully accessible playgrounds to five, located at:

- 1) Kinsmen Park (City Park neighbourhood);
- 2) Morris T. Cherneskey Park (Blairmore Urban Centre);
- 3) W.W. Ashley Park (Haultain neighbourhood);
- 4) Ashworth Holmes Park (Caswell Hill neighbourhood); and
- 5) Ernest Lindner Park (Erindale neighbourhood).

In addition, the recently constructed neighbourhood core park in Brighton also includes a fully accessible playground structure with a rubberized ground surface. After the completion of park warranty and establishment periods, the structure will be turned over to the City for the 2024 season.

Playground Structures Asset Management

Playground structures are one of the many sub assets considered within the Parks Asset Management Plan. The 2021 Parks Asset Management Update Report identifies that all of the various park sub assets (including playground structures) contribute to a

\$4.85 million funding gap that is required annually to achieve a higher expenditure level of “B” and an average sub asset performance rating of good.

Currently, the Parks Infrastructure Reserve provides \$1.91 million in annual funding to renew and upgrade various park sub assets, including the replacement of playground structures to meet current accessibility standards. The current asset management plan and identified funding gap is based on the current inventory of play structures and comparable replacement structures. Depending on the size of playground, the playground structure replacement projects cost in the range of \$150,000 for a smaller structure, generally located in a pocket park, to \$250,000 to \$300,000 for a larger structure in a neighbourhood park. For comparison purposes, the cost to construct a larger fully accessible playground structure that includes a rubberized surface has been estimated at approximately \$425,000. Therefore, moving to an enhanced level of accessible design for all existing playgrounds and structures, when they are scheduled to be replaced, would require an update to the Parks Asset Management Plan and would create a greater funding gap than currently identified.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Opportunities exist to increase the levels of accessibility of playground structures and surfacing in the City’s parks. Considerations include the costs and operating impacts of playground structure surfaces and potential policy changes.

Costs and Operating Impacts of Playground Surfaces and Structures

The type of surfacing material used underneath play structures has the largest impact on both capital costs associated with play structure installation, and the level of accessibility that can be achieved. Currently, three main types of surfacing are used: sand, engineered wood fibre, and rubberized.

Sand used in playgrounds costs approximately \$35 per square meter, while engineered wood fibre used in playgrounds costs approximately \$55 per square meter. Sand provides the least amount of accessible play opportunities, while engineered wood fibre provides a slightly higher level of accessibility. Rubberized surfacing, which provides the greatest level of accessibility, costs approximately \$220 per square meter to install. Including installation and annual operating impacts over an estimated 15-year lifespan of rubberized surfacing, the cost is approximately double compared to sand/engineered wood fibre. The lower annual maintenance cost of rubberized surfacing does not make up for the increased installation cost.

When considering play structures with enhanced levels of accessibility, the incremental costs vary from structure to structure, so within an overall playground area, this could result in as much as 30-50% increase in overall costs. For playgrounds with a larger rubberized surface, the increase in cost would be more than 50% due to the increased surface area.

Potential Policy Changes

Increasing the level of playground surface accessibility and enhanced number of accessible components of the play structures will require increased levels of funding to support the higher capital costs associated with rubberized surfacing and incremental structure costs for new and existing playgrounds. Replacement and/or expansion of existing playgrounds and structures are to be funded through the Park Infrastructure Reserve. They are not eligible to draw from the Park and Recreation Levy. The Parks and Recreation Levy, guided by Policy C03-011, is a one-time charge against new land development required to raise funds for the provision of new parks and recreation facilities in new neighbourhoods only. The current levy rates are set based on the current minimum standards for playgrounds and structures.

Based on the considerations above, a policy change, that could increase the levels of accessibility of playgrounds and structures in parks, would be to require:

- All playgrounds in new developments to be constructed with rubberized surfaces, textures, colors, ramps, accessible swings and include an increased level of accessibility and inclusive play of the structures (to a standard identified within the Standard Construction Specifications: Parks); and
- All playgrounds replaced by the Parks Department to be constructed with rubberized surfaces, textures, colors, ramps, accessible swings and include an increased level of accessibility and inclusive play of the structures (to a standard identified within the Standard Construction Specifications: Parks).

Currently, the Parks Department replaces three to four play structures per year and the ground surfacing is sand or engineered wood fibre. Requiring rubberized surfacing, without providing additional funding, will reduce the number and/or scope of play structure replacements by approximately half. A new standard that includes accessible surfaces and enhanced accessible play structures in existing parks would be funded via the Parks Infrastructure Reserve. Implementation of new standards at current funding levels would result in a further funding deficiency associated with the current Parks Asset Management Plan. Future maintenance and repair considerations will also be required to be incorporated into future Asset Management strategies.

Prior to implementing any policy changes, further analysis to identify impacts on new park construction costs and operating impacts over the long-term would be required. Such a standard would be clearly identified and incorporated into the City's Park Development Guidelines and the Standard Parks Specifications.

Further to this, should there be policy changes to the design standards for playgrounds and structures for all new playgrounds, it will also require a review and update of the Parks and Recreation Levy rates to account for the cost impacts of the higher cost playgrounds. Any changes to the Parks and Recreation Levy rates requires consultation with the building and development industry, to confirm the change in standards and the resulting impacts on the levy rates.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

If Administration is directed to bring forward the policy changes identified in this report to increase the standard for playground structures and surfacing, additional consultation with development industry and further reporting would be required. Future reports would further identify the full financial implications, including the impact to the mill rate to support increased operating costs and asset management plans, capital costs for existing play structure replacement, and increases to the Park and Recreation Levy to support the new standard in developing neighborhoods. Additional asset data will be available in the first half of 2022 after the third-party Playground Condition and Safety Assessment Report is received.

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Increases to the Parks and Recreation Levy rate to support increased design and construction standards for playgrounds and structures would require further engagement with developers.

NEXT STEPS

Administration will maintain the status quo and activities outlined in the “Current Status” section above, unless directed to proceed with further detailed reporting on one or more of the concepts presented in this report.

APPENDICES

1. Minimum Playground Accessibility Requirements
2. Playground Structure Inventory and Accessibility Rating
3. Examples of Playground Accessibility Standards

REPORT APPROVAL

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