

Community-Built Playgrounds

“Community-built” playgrounds have received much attention in the past few years. To quote the Community Built Association, the term refers to “the end product of a community-based design, organization and construction effort.” And the payoff, according to the Association, is a permanent transformation of the environment that becomes a “priceless symbol of the community spirit” behind each project.

Beyond this general definition, the meaning of “community-built” is up to you:

- It can be as simple as having your landscape architect work with citizen committees during the design phases of the project.
- Or it can mean asking individuals and businesses to volunteer equipment, tools and manpower when you’re ready to turn the community-approved design into a reality.

Site-assembled vs. site-built

Often, “community-built” refers to *site-built* playgrounds that have been created by grassroots coalitions of parents, children and neighborhood residents. “Site-built” means a playground that is constructed on location from raw materials instead of using manufactured components.

Another approach to community playgrounds is the *site-assembled* method, which invites community leaders and volunteers to collaborate in the design of a playground made of factory-engineered and tested components. When the playground’s design is complete, members of the community can work together in preparing the site and installing the custom-designed play system.

Like the site-built playground, a site-assembled playground has several major advantages over an off-the-shelf play system:

- The community-built playground becomes a rallying point for community spirit. Citizens of different



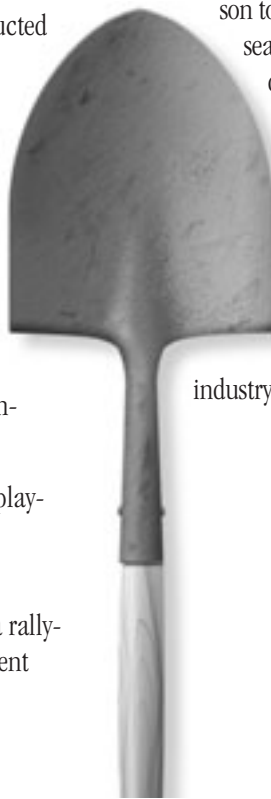
“The community-built playground becomes a rallying point for community spirit.”

ages, genders, economic backgrounds, races and cultures work in unison toward a common goal.

- Community involvement makes it easier to raise funds and build political support for a new playground.
- A community-built playground can serve as a team-building opportunity for employees of corporations and other organizations.
- When citizens help to develop a playground, the resulting pride of ownership tends to discourage vandalism.

The site-assembled playground also has advantages over entirely “homegrown” designs:

- When designed with help from a responsible manufacturer, it will meet U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, ASTM and ADA guidelines—an important consideration in today’s regulatory environment.
- Maintenance costs are usually less, especially in comparison to wood systems that may need frequent chemical sealing, inspection and repairs. Maintenance procedures are also likely to be time-tested and more sophisticated. In fact, many equipment manufacturers (including Landscape Structures) document specific maintenance procedures for individual play components.
- Insurance costs for your playground may be lower when you use equipment that has been certified to meet ASTM F1487 and other industry safety standards.



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A community-built playground requires adequate time for planning, design, fundraising and installation. Your Landscape Structures representative can help you prepare a realistic timeline.

Starting at the grassroots

Before you can design and erect a community-built playground of any type, you need community support for your plans. This requires several steps:

- **Identify stakeholders.** These are the children, parents, park or school personnel, and childcare providers who will directly benefit from the project.
- **Target potential supporters.** These could include PTAs, neighborhood groups, service clubs, local government agencies, religious groups, trade unions, and local news media.
- **Invite participation.** Schedule meetings with stakeholders, approach community organizations, solicit help from businesses, and inform the news media of your plans.

Next, you'll need to *organize your effort* by creating task groups for site design, equipment layout and design, fund-raising, site preparation and equipment installation. Appoint chairs or team leaders for your task groups, then invite the team leaders to elect an overall project leader.

A collective design process

A true community-built playground requires a collaborative design process that involves both children and adults. This process is typically divided into four steps:

- **Define your goals.** You'll need a highly specific mission statement accompanied by realistic financial objectives.
- **Gather design input.** Schedule and publicize a "design day" where citizens of all ages can suggest their ideas for playstructure themes, play activities, color schemes, site layout and landscaping.
- **Obtain a professional plan.** A landscape architect or other professional playground designer will save you money in the long run by minimizing legal expenses, liability exposure and maintenance costs.
- **Review your plan with the community.** At your "Design Review Day" meeting, you can recruit volunteers to help with fund-raising, donation of equipment and materials, installation labor, etc.



Landscape Structures is active in the Community Built Association, a professional organization whose members have helped some 2,000,000 local volunteers develop projects in more than 1,000 communities on five continents. LSI is involved in over 500 community-built playground projects annually.

Fund-raising can be fun.

Building a safe, durable play facility is never cheap, even when volunteers are willing to supply labor and materials. Fund-raising can boost your budget while uniting the community in a common cause and teaching children the benefits of hard work. Steps include:

- **Put together a package of options.** These could include recycling drives, raffles, dinners, breakfasts, door-to-door sales, UPC labels, book fairs, silent auctions, readathons, grants and donations from businesses.
- **Prepare a timetable.** Schedule your activities over a period of months, to keep cash flow constant.
- **Publicize your efforts** with banners, signs, and stories in the local news media.
- **Acknowledge your contributors** to show your appreciation for their support.

Many hands make light work.

Preparing for volunteer installation involves several steps:

- **Appoint a committee,** which should include working subcommittees to handle the tasks of volunteer recruitment, food, child care, security, public relations, and tools and supervision.
- **Hire an experienced installer** to supervise the installation crews.
- **Develop a calendar of events** to plan installation activities.

When it's time to proceed with installation, you'll need to *prepare the site and install the equipment* according to the manufacturer's directions.

Finally, *celebrate your community's success* with grand-opening festivities at the playground.



Landscape Structures has published a detailed manual titled Community Built Playgrounds—From Inspiration to Celebration. For information on this manual, see your local Landscape Structures representative.

