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Accessible playground in the works

Park would have equipment for children with disabilities



Provided by United Cerebral Palsy of West Alabama

An artist's rendering shows what the playground designed for children with disabilities would look like when built.

By Jamon Smith Staff Writer

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TUSCALOOSA | Most playgrounds are made for jumping and climbing, but one that is being proposed would serve a slightly different purpose.

United Cerebral Palsy of West Alabama plans to build the first fully accessible park in West Alabama by year's end.

Toni Franklin, executive director of UCPWA, said the park -- currently dubbed "UCP Park" -- will enable children with physical disabilities to play in an equal opportunity setting.

"If you've ever gone to a playground, think about how many children you saw in wheelchairs and with walking

aids," Franklin said Thursday. "There were likely hardly any, but if you did see some, they were probably sitting there doing nothing while other kids played."

She said the proposed playground differs from most playgrounds that are considered accessible.

"Most of our parks and playgrounds today are considered accessible because they provide wheelchair ramps or wheelchair-accessible parking, but they do not provide the equipment or support equipment that can be used for children [with disabilities] to play with," she said.

Franklin said many people with disabilities try to participate in regular recreational programs in their communities, but often end up feeling more tolerated than valued, losing out on the positive aspects of participation, such as camaraderie and team building.

That won't be an issue at the UCP park, Franklin said.

The park, which will be located in Northport at 1100 UCP Parkway, will utilize special equipment and include a playground area with a surface made of crushed rubber.

Franklin said the rubberized surface, which is made from the same rubber used to make tires and will account for nearly half of the park's 1,600 square feet, will reduce injuries from falls and stimulate play because of its unusual texture.

"It's the surface material that will truly make the difference for the children because children with and without disabilities can play equally on this surface," Franklin said.

The park's equipment will look standard, but will have some key variations that enable it to accommodate children who have moderate to severe physical disabilities.

For instance, the park will have swings shaped like car seats, with belts and bar shoulder straps to keep children in place, and swings that latch onto a wheelchair to allow children with severely limited movement to swing while sitting in their chairs.

Other park amenities include a lighted walking path, picnic tables, barbeque grills, a covered pavilion, a climbing center and a play center.

The play center will be for children ages 2 to 12 and has sliding boards and equipment such as therapeutic sandboxes and ground-level play panels with different games like tic-tac-toe and flashing light/ sound games that vary in size to accommodate children of different ages.

The climbing center, Franklin said, will be shaped like a car with open sides so children in wheelchairs can easily transition from their chairs to the car seats.

Construction on the park, which will cost \$398,000, is set to begin April 1 and be completed by the end of September, Franklin said.

Franklin said UCP hopes to raise half of its \$300,000 goal for the park by April.

"We realize that raising half this amount in cash donations and pledges by April 1 is aggressive, but we also realize that Tuscaloosa County and the surrounding counties are very generous and giving," Franklin said.

"We feel that this project will meet so many needs in the West Alabama area and that everyone will want to participate in making this dream come true for our children."

Franklin said the \$98,000 difference between the total cost of the park and UCP's fundraising goal will be borne by the agency through donated construction services.