

Playground opens for special-needs kids

Local businesses, hundreds of volunteers participate in Rotary's community contribution

By Yoko Minoura
The Bulletin

Sitting atop a metal structure in the blazing sun in southeast Bend recently, Walt Schloer drilled bolt holes in a metal beam.

Schloer was working on the pergola, an open structure that will soon shade picnic benches and residents after a hard day of play at the new Rotary Centennial Playground. Part of Larkspur Park, the new playground was designed to allow children and families of all abilities, including those with physical or developmental disabilities, to play together.

Although most parks are handicapped-accessible, the Rotary Centennial Playground is the first park in Bend designed with special-needs users in mind. The four-year project involved dozens of local busi-

nesses and hundreds of local Rotarians.

Each member of the four local Rotary clubs — Bend, Bend High Desert, Bend Mount Bachelor and Greater Bend — was required to spend a minimum of 16 hours on the project. The clubs have a total of roughly 350 members, according to Rotarian and project co-chairman Roger Fisher.

Fisher said the playground is not entirely complete. Portable toilets will remain on site until the handicapped-accessible bathrooms can be finished. Workers will resurface the areas around certain swings for wheelchair access, and several trees have yet to be planted. But with all major work done, Rotarians held a ribbon-cutting to formally open the park Friday afternoon.

See **Playground** / A9



Rotarian Dick Wattler works on the pergola, a structure that will provide shade at the Rotary Centennial Playground. The playground formally opened Friday afternoon.

Anthony Dimaano / The Bulletin

“The hands-on part of it is the best part. You can always give money, but when you go build something and see kids using it, it’s really different.”

— **Walt Schloer, incoming governor for Rotary District 5110**

Playground

Rotary chapters have built special-use parks across the country

Continued from A1

The playground features three “pods,” or units of playground equipment, for different age groups. Each structure, encircled by a ramp, stands on a rubberized surface instead of wood chips for better access.

Rotarian and project co-chairman Gardner Williams said the project would have probably cost roughly \$1.5 million, including the land, if the clubs had to pay for everything. The clubs raised roughly a third of that in cash.

The rest came in donations of labor, equipment and services, Williams said. The Bend Metro Park and Recreation District agreed to assume responsibility for playground maintenance.

According to Fisher, a need and desire exists for special-use playgrounds. The concept for the Rotary Centennial Park was originally a suggestion of a resident with a special-needs child, and similar playgrounds elsewhere see heavy use, he said. The Rose Garden Children’s Park, a handicapped-accessible playground in Portland, is the most popular park within the Portland Parks and Recreation District.

And several special-use parks built around the nation — including the Rose Garden Children’s Park — were projects of Rotary clubs.

Fisher said the Rotary Centennial Playground found tremendous support.

“A lot of (Rotarians) have (devoted) literally hundreds of hours,” he said. Many of those hours were spent planning the

playground, fund raising and scouring the community for people with the expertise for things they couldn’t do themselves.

“We’d say, ‘who knows someone who can put in a curb?’ And (someone) would say, ‘I know somebody, I’ll go out,’” Fisher said.

Rotarians also did plenty of work during the actual construction phase, laying sod, raking bark dust and mulch and working on a bridge, the bathrooms and the pergola.

Schloer, the incoming governor for Rotary District 5110, said that he enjoyed actual construction the most.

“The hands-on part of it is the best part,” he said. “You can always give money, but when you go build something and see kids using it, it’s really different.”

The work parties also gave Rotarians a chance to meet members from other clubs and built a stronger sense of unity, Schloer said. Getting Rotarians to turn out for an afternoon to work on the playground was never a problem.

“The biggest part is organizing all the volunteer help that shows up,” he said.

He joked that his two grandsons — 6-year-old Will Crates and 4-year-old Matt Crates — tested the playground equipment to make sure it was in working order.

Fisher said that, although the park was designed with special-needs children in mind, it won’t necessarily meet the needs of every child.

“It’s a compromise,” he said. “That’s part of the real difficulty — how do you meet the needs of so many different kids? (But) we hope there’s a little bit here for everybody.”

Yoko Minoura can be reached at 541-383-0387 or at yminoura@bendbulletin.com.
