

## **PlaySafe and Live Well!**

Welcome to PlaySafe, LLC's informational column. Every month we will work hard to provide you with up-to-date information on topics related to parks, recreation, health, wellness, and physical education. Our hope is that by providing you with detailed information, you will go forward and positively change the world. If you have questions or comments, or if you would like to share your thoughts, please contact us through this web site. Thanks. Now PlaySafe and live well!

### **How to Determine the Feasibility of a Playground Area**

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With Special Guest Craig Kelsey Ph.D.

Many community leaders at schools, parks departments, child care centers, and other agencies often wonder if they should rally resources for new or improved playground areas. Of course their concern is for students or young people who need a safe and healthy place to play and learn that offers challenges but with risks well under control. It would seem that this type of decision is easy. However, with so many fiscal, political, space, and safety pressures the local leader may need additional ways to help thinking through this process. The playground feasibility process may help.

The playground feasibility process is clear, straight forward and easy to prepare but at the same time requires the local leader to consider several key areas in their decision making process. There are six components:

1. Legal feasibility: This process requires the local leader to determine if the land site ownership is in place and that all liens, easements and right-of-ways are cleared for the proposed playground project. If the playground area is at a school site, then this is an easy step for the school official; this would also be true for a park official if the land site is within a park area. However, there are times and places (particularly with private companies or non profits) where this extra step needs to be taken. Close review of ownership maps is the easiest way to answer this set of important questions.
2. Site feasibility: This element determines if the surface, sub surface, drainage, vegetation, wildlife, supervision lines of site, and weather patterns of the site are appropriate for the proposed project. Again, some of these considerations will appear to be of little concern, but depending on the location the local official might have a surprise. It is certainly better to have these items reviewed early on rather than at construction time. This may be of little concern within an existing school area or park, but there might be better locations within those areas for the playground because of these concerns.
3. Use feasibility: An analysis should be made of the intended population of users to determine whether there is a long term need for such a proposed action. In other words, do you need a playground? Also within this consideration would be maximum number of users on the equipment at one time to ensure safety. Of course, there are standards for capacity of use and this information is an important guiding principle based on type of

equipment, age appropriateness, fitness and mental challenge goals, and type of play activity.

4. Design feasibility: When the local official is searching for the right equipment, playground vendors are extremely helpful in providing design layouts, space requirements, entrance and exit points and playground configurations. This is important so that the decision maker can envision the finished project. But this also answers another important question: will the completed playground achieve the vision of the decision makers, users and others that work to make the project all that was hoped for?

5. Financial feasibility: For many, this is the key question...can we afford the equipment/surfacing, its installation, and long term care? It is important to have accurate cost figures for the purchase of the correct equipment and surfacing. But it is also necessary to not forget installation costs, initial and continuous safety audits/inspections, and also the long term care and maintenance of the finished playground. On occasion, community decision makers will become very excited at meeting immediate needs and forget about these long term cost issues. This part of the feasibility study will help solve that issue.

6. Administrative feasibility: This last process investigates the policies and practical management activities that must be in place for the completed project's long term success. Such questions as: repair cycles, maintenance plans, hours of operation, enclosure gates, signage, supervision plans, life cycle, and any other issues that should be considered so that the project is not just built and then left to the elements. Contact with other agencies, playground vendors, designers, and safety inspectors is helpful at this point. They will be able to draw from their vast experience and share insights.

In the ideal circumstance all six feasibility factors check off in the positive. But what if one or more of the items are a concern? Well, this is the reason for performing this task, to make sure that the project meets all elements so it will be a success. However, it is possible to move forward with some concerns. There are certainly some factors that can not be ignored such as land ownership. However, even that might be mediated by a land lease agreement. What is important here is that the local decision maker has taken all of these factors into consideration and noted where some adjustments must be made, or to decide that the project needs further consideration.

Playgrounds are designed and intended for many generations of use. Therefore a serious feasibility study is an important step to ensure project success.