

Tobey Transformation

Park's appeal enhanced with skateboard and dog areas

JONATHAN DEVIN | Special to The Daily News

Nicole Heverly, a Midtowner, didn't have a reason to visit Tobey Park until a couple months ago when it became the site of the city's first dog park. "I heard about it, but I would walk my dog and take him to Overton (Park)," said Heverly. "The first time here I was in love with it. Jay has other dogs to play with."

Jay is Heverly's 9-month-old boxer-shepherd mix. At the time of their visit, Heverly and Jay were the only ones using the fenced dog park on Avery Street behind the city's Division of Parks Services office, though she said she's seen as many as 40 dogs and their owners playing together.

Now the dog park is set to get some new neighbors on wheels, thanks to Monday's announcement by the city of Memphis of a \$440,000 skate park to be built in Tobey Park, the first of its kind in the city limits.

If things go as planned, Tobey Park, which already has softball fields, a baseball field, beach volleyball court and a rugby field, will continue being transformed from a haven for team sports to a place where individuals can play too. Plans for the design have not been created yet, but Toni Holmon-Turner, public affairs manager for Park Services, said a public meeting to discuss amenities will be held soon.

"For quite some time, the city has received many requests for a skate park," Holmon-Turner said. "The total square footage (of the skate park site) is 10,000 to 15,000 and it will be an open-air, outdoor facility. We are currently looking at a September 2011 completion date."

The local architecture firm Askew Hargraves Harcourt & Associates (A2H), which has planned almost 20 parks for the city, will handle design along with Wormhoudt Inc. of Santa Cruz, Calif. "(Wormhoudt) is a one of the top skate park designers in the country," said Andy Reynolds, a landscape architect with A2H. "There's all kinds of things – rails, bowls, half pipes and quarter pipes – that (skaters) like to have. I'm not sure what style of skate park it will be at this point. I'm guessing that (the park) would have the same time of access where they limit vehicles at night, but don't restrict pedestrian traffic."

Proponents of the skate park say the path leading to the announcement has been as curvy as a proposed park itself. "It's actually come full circle," said Aaron Shafer of Skatelite Memphis, the group that spearheaded the proposal to build a skate park. He's originally from the West Coast where skateboarding and skate parks are common sights, but Shafer got a dose of hometown politics when he brought the idea to city leaders.

In 2008, Shafer proposed Tobey Park, which is between Central Avenue and Union Extended on the eastern cusp of Midtown, as a site for the skate park because of its central location. "What happened was that with the fairground redevelopment, there was a possibility that they would need part of that space at Tobey, so then we started looking at Glenview Park as a secondary option," Shafer said, referring to redevelopment of the Mid-South Fairgrounds.

Shafer wasn't the only one befuddled by the fairgrounds redevelopment. "I wish we had the full plan for the fairgrounds," said Emily Bishop, a board member of the Cooper-Young Community Association, who participated in early committee meetings to form guidelines for the fairgrounds redevelopment plans. "They're going ahead with the skate park at Tobey Park, and I'm just a bit frustrated with the lack of communication about how these things relate to each other. Maybe there's a very good reason why a skate park should be at Tobey and not at the fairgrounds, but a skate park was one of the things we talked about to be in the fairgrounds plan."

The City Council was set to approve the plan at Glenview Park in January when it was quashed by Councilwoman Wanda Halbert, in whose district Glenview Park lies. She cited the historic nature of Glenview Park and bad economic times as reasons.

But Councilman Jim Strickland, whose district includes Tobey Park, said having a skate park will not come at the expense of other budget items because it will be paid for out of the capital improvement budget.

“Capital improvement budgets are different from operating budgets,” said Strickland. “Our real difficult times are with the operating budgets, although we have greatly reduced the amount of spending that we have in capital improvements. “This is what’s hard to convey to the public – if you didn’t do the \$400,000 skate park, that money couldn’t be spent in an operating budget.”

Strickland and Shafer met again about two months ago and rebirthed the Tobey Park site with no hard feelings.

“Skateboarding is what baseball was to my parents’ generation, where you just go out and hit the ball with your friends,” said Shafer. “It’s nice to have a facility where this spontaneous activity can occur, and I could see Tobey becoming that.”

Skatelite Memphis mentors kids through **Memphis Athletic Ministries** and Golden Child Ministries and tries to spread the word that skateboarding is safe.

“The top two reasons for injuries are skating over uneven surfaces and hitting cracks, and car collisions, so when you put a kid in a skate park, you lower the injury rate tenfold,” Shafer said.
