Moraga Commons Skatepark - Phase 2: Enhancing the Experience

Jeffrey Phunmongkol
California Polytechnic State University
San Luis Obispo, California

Moraga Commons Skatepark is located in the East Bay Area, of Northern California. An affluent small town, the skatepark serves as a great outdoor space where kids can exercise and enjoy. Originally built in 2003, Moraga Skatepark has been my second home ever since I started skateboarding. Myself, along with others, have noticed specific aspects of the skatepark that are poorly designed. In addition, the park has experienced general wear and depreciation from years of use. I wanted to create a potential improvement plan that would include slight skatepark design changes and ultimately addition of park amenities to improve the overall experience and atmosphere of the park.

Key Words: Recreational Space, Facilities, Skatepark, Experience, Atmosphere, Improvement, Community

Introduction

In this day and age, physical health is among one of the most important aspects of everyday life. Finding a reliable, safe, and fun space to exercise can be difficult for some, depending on where people live, conditions of where they live, and what recreational spaces are readily available. From a planning standpoint, it is very important to understand how to attract residents and visitors to parks and promote more physical activity. As mentioned by the director of Active Living by Design at the University of North Carolina, Richard Killingsworth said, “most people perceive parks as strong amenities, and more people will use them if they’re within walking distance (Harnik, P., & Simms, J., 2004). It would seem apparent that if a park is within a convenient walking distance, it would be used more. Despite the act of actually going to a park, what about the actual physical act of exercising? Observational studies in the United States have shown that more than 50% of park users are involved in sedentary behavior. In addition, visually attractive parks and exceptional features have been shown to be related to increased park visitors and physical activity. (Veitch & co., 2012). Even if parks are attractively close, it appears that that does not necessarily solve the issue of promoting more physical activity. It is interesting to think that Parks and Recreation agencies play a large role in influencing and promoting physical health. This relationship ultimately could be a driving force in solving the national epidemic of obesity and other related diseases. By being able to understand the location, spread, and essentially, the quality of recreational facilities, it can greatly help officials in designing and creating more successful programs to promote more physical activity across the nation (Cavnar & co., 2004).

In a study conducted by a group of researchers from the RAND Center for Population Health and Health Disparities, “Effects of Park Improvements on Park Use and Physical Activity: Policy and Programming Implications” assessed the impacts of park improvements on park use and physical activity. The study looked at the low levels of physical activity and high levels of obesity throughout American adults and children. Several barriers that potentially deter people from physical activity include: long distances to recreational facilities/spaces, perhaps requiring transportation, busy streets, and inadequate park space. They noticed insufficient investments in updating recreational facilities. Many believe the lack of attractive and safe spaces is a primary reason why physical activity levels are low. Researchers used ten urban parks and their respective communities. Half were labeled as “intervention parks” with scheduled major improvements. Intervention parks were matched with similar parks to compare with.

The results found that park use and physical activity actually declined in both groups, which was directly attributable to less schedule-organized activities/events. Park safety perception increased more with intervention
parks than comparison parks. Park improvements may not directly result in increased use and physical activity as there are many factors that contribute to general park use and would need to be accounted for in future projects. Simply improving perceptions of safety is unlikely to directly increase park/facility use (Cohen & co., 2008).

This study sheds light on the concept of improving recreational spaces to bring more users into parks/facilities. The study specifically analyzes the impact of park use and physical activity. Looking at the preliminary research, it appears that there are a variety of variables and factors that will lure or detract people from going to a park or recreational facility. But, that is simply the act of GOING. How about the act of actually performing physical activity?

In my study, I wanted to assess potential areas for park improvements at Moraga Commons Skatepark and how to ultimately enhance the experience for users, whether it would simply attracting more visitors or making the current locals more happy with the park.

**Methodology**

**Facebook**

The first survey I conducted was through an old Facebook group called “Mo-park.” The group contains 185 members and includes many local skaters from Moraga Skatepark and mutual friends. This group has been inactive for years but I saw it as a good starting point to ask people their opinions as this is a very honest, genuine pool of people. I asked the group what kinds of changes or additions they thought could benefit the community and the kids. The post received 10 “likes,” 2 “hearts,” and a total of 41 comments, including my own responses.

**Site Visit/Survey of Users**

I made a trip home to survey park users and conduct a thorough site analysis. I was able to talk to a few friends who had thoughts about specific changes. I asked very general questions regarding the skatepark; what would you want to see in a new design?, what would you take out/leave?, what are things not related to the skatepark design you would fix/change?, etc.

In addition to my site visit, I conducted a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis that I will later relate to my findings. I did my SWOT analysis based on my personal experience and opinions from being an avid skateboarder at Moraga Skatepark.

**Results**

**Skatepark Design Recommendations**

The following is a list of the results regarding the actual design of the skatepark itself:

- The most mentioned item people wanted added was a single metal **flatbar**.
- Secondly, people wanted to fill in the cutouts throughout the skatepark, in between the stairs and besides the circle and square rail (see Figures 7a-7d).
  - Creating a “euro gap” from one of the 3 blocks beside the circle/square rails. A handful of people mentioned this in addition to simply filling in the steps and creating ramp.
- Many skaters have mentioned to remove the small curb that surrounds the perimeter of the park (see Figures 8a-8b).
- To widen the grinding ledge/raising it to the second level (see Figure 7c).

**Skatepark Amenities Recommendations:**
The following is a list of the results regarding park amenities within the park limits:

- Addition of more benches throughout the skatepark
- Building a small fence against the hillside
- Evergreen trees for shade
- Bathroom onsite
- Lights
- Mitigation of scooters and bikes, possible new sign
- Shade structure, overhang structure
- Vending machine

**Conclusion**

Taking my research results and comparing that to my own SWOT analysis, I have created a rough sketch of the park changes. Courtesy of KC Bowman, Assistant Engineer of Public Works, Town of Moraga, I was able to obtain the as-built construction drawings for the Moraga Skatepark.

See attachments:

- T-1 - Site Plan for Cover Sheet
- L-2 - Hardscape Grading Plan with markups of proposed changes
- L-3 - Softscape Grading Plan with highlighted areas of potential landscape redesign

**SWOT Analysis**

The skatepark is approximately 15 years old and has experienced its fair share of wear and tear. Over the years, myself and others have noticed issues or weaknesses to the park. Moraga Commons is a 40-acre public park where a variety of sports and activities occur, including a frisbee golf course behind the skatepark. This consistently poses risks as frisbees fly into the park, potentially hitting and hurting skaters. Another potential issue with the park is that despite being a public park, the nearest accessible bathrooms are on the other side of the park. Additionally, there is a water fountain in the basketball courts adjacent to the skatepark, but not within the limits of the skatepark. Seating is bountiful around the park, but only within the actual performing skatepark. People sit on park ledges around the perimeter. There are two park benches on the outskirts. The landscaping surrounding the park seems bland. There are lots of dry areas and thick shrub that ends up becoming trash accumulation areas. The skatepark sign calls for “Only Skateboarding” but bikers and scooters still pillage the skatepark.

For years, there has been talk about adding lights to the skatepark. Many skateparks throughout California, and the rest of the United States, have lights that automatically shut off by 9:30-10pm, depending on the skatepark. The main complaint with lights is the noise that it would create if people stayed at the park into the evening. Neighboring residents have expressed concern for noise if lights were added. Moraga Skatepark is on the opposing side of Moraga Road from the closest homes. Would the noise from the skatepark really be a burden to those neighbors?

**Final Synthesis**

There appears to be a range of skatepark design changes that are desired. As someone who has religiously skated at Moraga Commons Skatepark, I would personally feel a little upset if I showed up to the skatepark and the entire park design had been changed. I merely wanted to find out a consistent trend or theme of what Moraga Skatepark lacked and then apply that concept in the most feasible and practical way to improve the overall experience.

The number one item that was mentioned in almost every survey or conversation I had was the addition of a simple flatbar. The skatepark has three rails but they are set up as downrails/handrails. A flat bar would be something that kids can learn tricks and be a fun addition to the design. Second to that, people found the arbitrary cut outs throughout the park, either in the stairs or adjacent to the banks and railings, should be filled in and repurposed (see
Figures 7a-7d). The park design was described on the Concrete Disciples Skatepark Guide and Locator, “the bowl is surrounded by a street area with a strange choice of transitions that start on one end and then all of a sudden there are some stairs.. weird…” (Concrete Disciples, Moraga Skatepark). A flatbar could be added over a flat surface which could be established with a simple redesign of the cutouts/stairs (see Figure 7b). The only issue with this is, what would happen to the square hand/down rail that is currently there? Possibly remove the rail altogether to put in a new flatbar that will be used more? These are the kinds of questions that I could not discern through my research. It is simply a possible location to add the flatbar.

A few people mentioned other aspects of the park aside from the skatepark design. There is a curb that surrounds the perimeter of the park. My suspicion is that it is utilized for drainage, to keep out runoff from entering into the park. From the years I have been coming to the skatepark, I have never really seen the purpose of the curbs. The curbs do prevent water from entering the park but only during a torrential downpour when no one is there. A few people mentioned to remove the curb as it poses potential risks being adjacent to obstacles, in addition to limiting runup and roll away space. The removal of the curb could possibly promote more dirt entering the park, but it would open up the park a little more, at least on the north side (see Figure 8a-8b).

Additionally, a redesign of the surrounding landscaping could ultimately change the feeling and environment of the park. The addition of more trees throughout the park could provide more shade, evergreen trees were specifically suggested. On the south and north ends of the park, there’s thick brush that accumulates trash and isn’t the most aesthetically pleasing. These areas could be repurposed and potentially add more seating such as benches or tables. One suggestion was building a shade structure, either on the north or south side, that would be an architectural feature to improve the appearance of the park, while also creating coverage. One person mentioned building a fence along the hillside to prevent frisbees entering the skatepark. These could also be a possible location to create more seating or space within the skatepark. People wouldn’t have to sit on park obstacles and it would create space for spectators. These could be possible locations to add a bathroom, a water fountain/hydration station, perhaps even a vending machine, right onsite (see Sheet L-3 for proposed changes).

As mentioned, there are a variety of suggestions and changes that people have proposed. I wish it could be possible to be able to implement all these changes into a single plan. It simply would not be possible without completely changing the current park design and that should not have to happen. This research was merely to investigate what the current generation and kids are seeking in an updated design of the skatepark we all call home. Other aspects of an improvement project like this were not included in this study, such as cost estimating, logistics, permitting, etc.

References


Figure 4a: Hillside on East end of skatepark

Figure 4b: Hillside/Frisbee Golf Course

Figure 5a: Area of cracked concrete

Figure 5b: Cracked concrete - rework can be seen

Figure 6a: Landscaping at South end of skatepark

Figure 6b: Landscaping at North end of skatepark
Figure 7a: Stairs adjacent to circle downrail

Figure 7b: Possible location for flatbar

Figure 7c: Arbitrary cutouts in stairs

Figure 7d: Stairs adjacent to square downrail

Figure 8a: Perimeter curb on North end

Figure 8b: Perimeter curb on West side
Potential Landscape Redesign - possible location for shade structure (Figure 6a)

Potential Landscape Redesign - possible location for fence and more seating (Figure 4a-4b)

Addition of bathroom, water fountain, vending machine here