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The Boston Globe Sports plus section

They've made finding some board room their business

By Tony Chamberlain, Globe Staff | April 8, 2005

When Nancy Schon, the sculptor famous for her "Make Way for Ducklings" figures, heard that skateboarders were defacing one of her works a few years ago, she became enraged.

The president of Friends of Copley Square called to tell her that her sculpture, "The Tortoise and the Hare," was being used by boarders for various percussive moves -- ollies and grinds.

"It made me mad as a hatter," she said.

So she went to Copley Square to admonish the kids bonking on her sculpture, but her reaction surprised even her.

"I started talking to them and I found that they were intelligent, nice kids," she said. "They're athletes who had nowhere to go to participate in their sport."

Like many Bostonians who get annoyed by the noisy cavorting of skateboarders on public ways, Schon quickly became a fan of the 1-acre, \$2 million Charles River Skatepark taking shape in East Cambridge on land made available by the Big Dig.

The park is a pet project of the Charles River Conservancy, a group formed five years ago to protect and improve the riverside parklands around Boston. CRC founder Renata von Tscharner said the project has slowed some from its projected 2006 opening because of asbestos removal in North Point Park, the Big Dig parcel.

But, according to von Tscharner, that only helps broaden the fundraising efforts and there's an outside chance the park still may be completed by 2006. "Urban projects present a lot of complexity, and, unfortunately, this problem is out of our hands."

Aside from boarders, skaters, and bikers, the park has a growing number of fans and supporters, many of whom, like Schon, have a high regard for the development of recreational park lands that appeal to the young.

When Jody Stoddard and his wife, Christine Manning, who started a BMX bike shop in Weymouth, got wind of the new park, they moved the business to Cambridge, and have just placed their first order for

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skateboards and parts.

"We're still a BMX bike shop," said Manning. "But since we're just half a mile from the park, the [skateboard] parts and decks will be part of our niche business."

Added Stoddard, who was a professional mountain biker: "As soon as we heard that a skatepark was going to be built in East Cambridge, we began looking at shop space in the neighborhood. We've only been here for [a few] weeks and already our sales for the month of March have doubled. The park isn't even built yet." To von Tscharner, who moved to the United States from Switzerland in 1978, skateboarding as a sport appeals because, "It reminds me of dancing." But the development of the East Cambridge park also works toward an ideal of "rich urban life" she has seen in older cities, such as London and Bern, Switzerland, where she worked as an architect and city planner.

"In very old cities where there are not big spaces used for highways or large institutions, there is more integration in city life where nature and sports come together," she said. "That's what the park can accomplish."

It takes an imaginative eye to picture what the site will look like. A rough riverfront section beneath the soaring Zakim Bridge ramps, littered with piles of dirt, concrete barriers, and metal pipes, Lot 29F (its designation) is far from appealing at the moment. But to someone with von Tscharner's trained eye for the possible, the wasteland is a canvas ready for an artist's touch. Tennis courts, the 40,000-square-foot skatepark, and a dockside facility are part of the mix. The intent is to make the river an integral part of the park system, and open a part of the city few have visited, let alone considered as recreation land.

"This is unknown territory for anybody," said von Tscharner. "Most people know the Esplanade, but nobody has ever been down here."

The skatepark will include bowls, pipes, streetscape, and the "Wave Pipe" -- all designed for riders of skateboards, inline skates, and BMX bikes to perform the tricks riders now do on objects on city streets. But in Boston, anyone caught on these devices is fined \$100, basically shutting down the sport.

This -- along with the fact that some of her 11 grandchildren are skateboarders -- was enough to get Schon involved in the struggle to get what she calls a "world-class park" in Boston.

"These poor kids get such a bad rap," she said. "But if you really watch them, you see how good and talented they are as athletes. They need a place for themselves and what they do."

Skaters are mostly behind the park's creation, but some have expressed reservations about other Boston cityscapes being put off-limits once the park is done.

"We have places we like to go where there's nobody around and we don't get in trouble," said 15-year-old Gerald McPeck, who terms the park idea anywhere from "sick" to "awesome." Just don't take away his Korean War Memorial grounds in Charlestown, and other prized sites. "I hope just because they have a park they won't kick us out of everywhere else."

To make sure the park reflects what the mostly young male skaters are looking for, a number of public hearings have been held in the design phase, in which skaters offer suggestions. So far, the design models rendered have drawn the ultimate praise from McPeck.

"It looks sick," he said.

Through the summer, a number of Boston-area punk rock bands will play concerts to raise skateboard funds, said Noah Stockman, a spokesman for the Conservancy. And to encourage the fund-raising momentum, an anonymous donor has pledged to quadruple all donations to the park. "We really have a lot of momentum now, and this will be a great facility for the city," said von Tscherner, who has three children, ages 14, 20, and 23. "It just brings together so many good elements and makes good use of the land. It'll be a real bright spot in Boston."

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