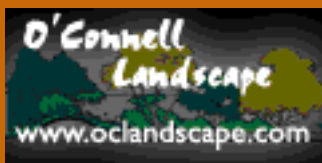


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Novato flips over new skateboard park

By Carolyn R. Saraspi

Whether to "get some big air," or simply glide along its perimeter, some 200 to 300 skating enthusiasts showed up yesterday at the opening of the county's first skate park, at Hamilton Field in Novato.

Skaters ranging from adults to youngsters barely taller than their skateboards cheered the launch of the \$1 million park - an approximately 15,000-square-foot facility of sunken concrete with bowls, ramps and rails surrounded by a black chain-link fence. Larry Dito, director of the city's park and recreation department, said the park is designed for beginning and intermediate skaters.

"I plan to do some grinds, and get some big air and a 360 and stuff. Definitely some grabs," said Chaise Standridge, 12, as he and dozens of others waited in line to get into the park.

"This is awesome," said Councilwoman Pat Eklund of the turnout. "I'm really proud Novato is the first in the county to provide a skate park to our kids in our community."

The much-anticipated park took four years to build, going through what Mayor John Mani described as a "torturous and byzantine process" of environmental studies, public comment sessions, and even a lawsuit from



OPENING DAY: A skater scrambles up the steep banking at the end of the new skateboard park. The park at Hamilton opened yesterday to crowds of skaters.

Photo: Frankie Frost

residents from the Marion Park area where the facility was originally proposed.

"I'm glad it's behind us," Mani told the crowd just before the gates opened yesterday morning.

The park is open daily from 10 a.m. to sunset. Skaters are required to wear knee and elbow pads, as well as helmets, at the park.

Although city staff will not supervise activities, Dito said police will regularly patrol the area. He also warned skaters yesterday that vandalism could shut down the now graffiti-free park.

Both skateboarders and in-line skaters said they were glad to have a local place dedicated to their sport. Standridge said kids like him would skate in the street, on sidewalks and curbs in places such as the old Pini Mill building before it was condemned last year.

"We'd destroy all the curbs and other places and we'd get in trouble," said Standridge, an in-line skater from Novato. "People would come and kick us out. Cops would threaten a juvenile arrest."

Many skaters would also travel to parks in Sonoma County, as well as the East Bay, to practice their tricks.

"(The Novato park) is better than Petaluma, but not as good as Vans (in Milpitas), because that's professional," Standridge said. "Petaluma is not verted - you can't go straight up."

Mani said one of the professional skaters who tried out the park prior to the general opening appreciated its "super smooth surface."

"So I said, 'I guess we won't need a Band-Aid concession for this park,' " Mani said.

Phil Burulson, a 15-year-old from Petaluma, agreed that the new facility was "pretty cool," although there were "too many little kids. They kind of stick together, and you have to weave through them."

The skate park is the first feature of Sport Court Island, an outdoor recreation area to which the City Council will add amenities once it finds funding, officials said. Dito expects the skate park to be well-used by those in and out of Marin.

"It'll be like this every day, without the adults," Dito said. "There will be a lot of kids out here."

Novato stores Old Town Sports and Marin Skate Sports, along with The Board Asylum of Petaluma, donated skating equipment, sweatshirts and gift certificates for raffle prizes as part of the fanfare.

Petaluma-based dairy firm Clover Stornetta gave out ice cream, while Austrian company Red Bull also distributed its highly caffeinated energy drinks.

Dennis Derammelaere, the three-time street luge gold medalist who grew up in Novato, was also on hand to show his support.

"I really do think this is something the city needed," said Derammelaere, who now lives in Cotati, as he signed posters for eager fans.

"Sports like Little League are so well supported and organized by parents, but there's nothing organized for kids of alternative sports," he said. "It's nice to see something like this come together. Skating is no longer a backyard sport, it's more mainstream, and this helps the sport develop as well."

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