

GOVERNMENT CENTER

The Boston Globe

Skaters have edge on this park project

By Will Kilburn, Globe Correspondent | April 18, 2004

It's a safe bet that the Iannella Council Chamber at Boston City Hall had never held so many skateboarders before, or that discussions there had never been led by a blond surfer from California, or that topics discussed had never included "cradles," "clamshells," and the relative merits of steel vs. pool coping on "half-pipes."

But that was the scene last Tuesday night, when the Boston area's skate, BMX, and conservation communities came together for a computerized first look at a proposal for a 40,000-square-foot concrete-and-steel skate park. It was designed with input from local skaters and riders, to be tucked underneath the highway access ramps at the mouth of the Charles River in a year or two.

"A lot of skate parks are stuck out in nonprime land, off behind the corporate yard, or put in places where they can find some assurance that if it's not successful, they don't have to worry about it," said park designer Zach Wormhoudt of Santa Cruz, Calif., whose firm, Wormhoudt Inc., has designed some 60 skate parks.

But he said the site of this park, on Big Dig-reclaimed land on the Cambridge side of the river, is "really showing that the skate park's being embraced by the community, not a project that's being done with any hesitation at all."

That may be an understatement: The park has attracted considerable support from people who will probably never use it, including Mayor Thomas M. Menino, Councilor Michael P. Ross, whose Eighth District is adjacent to the park, and Renata von Tscharner, an architect and urban planner. Von Tscharner is also founder and president of the Charles River Conservancy, a nonprofit group that works to preserve the parklands along the banks of the Charles.

Originally envisioned by students in a design class taught by von Tscharner, the skate park is being designed and built under the guiding hand of the Conservancy, which was instrumental in bringing together the local skaters and bikers with city and state officials, as well as lining up an anonymous benefactor who has pledged to quadruple local donations to the project. More than 20 percent of the estimated \$1.1 million cost of the park has been collected, according to the Conservancy.

Once complete, the skate park will be managed by the state Department of Conservation and Recreation. State Police will have jurisdiction over the facility, which will be open free of charge and to everyone.

But last week's meeting, like the park itself, was really about those who will eventually carve, hop, and grind their way around its ramps and bowls and who have worked closely with the designers to get the

features they want for beginner and expert skaters alike.

Some, like 26-year-old skater Ryan Buckley of Dorchester, were initially skeptical about the project, having seen similar efforts in East Boston, Hyde Park, and Hyannis fall short of expectations.

This time, though, supporters say it's different: Non-skaters are actually listening to the skaters, and importantly, designer Wormhoudt is a skater himself.

"He knows what he's talking about, so I don't have to explain normal terminology that we use all the time," said Buckley, who has visited and given high marks to other Wormhoudt Inc. creations during vacations from his job as a carpenter. "I bring up a pool-coping question, and he immediately knows what it is, and he was saying he was already thinking about it."

Buckley's earlier skepticism seemed to be shared by others in the room at the start of the evening, but after a video presentation and a slide show of various park features, he and others came away impressed. Suggestions by young skaters in attendance were encouraged by the older ones, while calls by veterans to make things bigger, higher, and faster were duly noted by Wormhoudt, who stressed throughout the evening that what he was showing was only a first draft of the park and that if the audience didn't like it, the plan would change.

But the preview was given positive reviews by most in the room.

"I do these things all over the world, and it doesn't always go that way," Wormhoudt said at the end of the meeting. "Not that that's a bad thing. What we we're trying to evoke out of people is a sense of what exactly they want."

"The way they responded to the design shows how they interact in a skate park," von Tscherner said of the skaters and bikers at the meeting. "It's an amazing community of different levels, and they work together, they skate together, they cheer each other on. In a way, it's a sandbox that works." ■