

To Throw Away a Playground ... or Not
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The Trumansburg Central School District's wooden playscape was built more than 20 years ago. Now, an unofficial playground committee working with the board of education is making plans to remove and replace the structure while others think its destruction is premature.

The 21-year-old playground was community built and is now older than most play structures made of pressure-treated wood. Problems associated with the material include rotting beneath the ground, splintering and leaching toxins, including arsenic.

Deb Austic, a member of the playground committee, said there are problems with the playground and it has reached the end of its expected lifespan of 20 years.

"When you put a roof on and it's supposed to last 30 years you expect to have to replace it," she said.

Austic said the structure served its purpose and was cutting edge for the time, but would not be allowed to be built today, especially with the discoveries about pressure-treated wood.

"What was acceptable ADA-wise 20 years ago, it isn't acceptable today," she said.

Jackie Merwin and Alan Vogel believe the Trumansburg playground has not been properly assessed and feel there are options other than tearing down the structure. They would like the wood strength to be tested and a chemical analysis done on the surrounding soil to see how many toxins are still leeching from the wood all these years later.

“Without doing some homework it’s hard to make an assessment,” Vogel said.

Vogel and David Gell, of the Black Locust Initiative, would like to analyze the playground’s current condition while making the process a learning experience for students.

“Students could take samples and send them away,” Vogel said. “Or perhaps as part of a chemistry class they could test for toxins.”

Plans for a new playground layout were presented to the board of education’s June 4 meeting. At the meeting, board members raised concerns that those involved with building the existing structure would be reluctant to see it come down. Austic said the committee is working to recognize people’s attachment to the structure.

“A lot of friendships were made and community was built,” Merwin, who helped fundraise for the original structure, said.

She said if the village is looking for a new community-building project the playground could be added to instead of rebuilt.

“We don’t want to throw away something there’s nothing wrong with,” she said.

Merwin also contends complaints that the maze-like castle structure makes supervision difficult and is prone to accidents. Austic said there are numerous complaints about supervising the structure and she believes concerns trickle down to the children. Often there are two supervisors to 80 children, she said.

“I don’t think the kids feel safe when they know no one’s watching them,” Austic said.

Merwin said she has no trouble keeping track of her 2-year-old grandson for 3-year-old twin nephews, nor has she heard of any major injuries on the playground. She

also believes being out of sight for a few minutes in a playground environment won't hurt children – something the current structure is perfect for, she said.

“This playground has a terrific, adventuring spirit to it,” Merwin said.

Instead of one large structure, the new preliminary design calls for separate play areas for elementary aged children and middle school students, and a lot of wide-open space. Austic said the idea for separate play areas was created because middle school students have not had access to the playground during school hours for years.

Vogel said while mixed-ages sharing a playground requires supervision it's not necessarily a bad thing.

“My gut feeling would be let these kids play together,” he said. “It's a good learning experience.”

The playground committee has not professionally assessed the condition of the playground, but adding to the current structure, as suggested, is unlikely.

“It would be very difficult to put up a new structure without the old structure coming down,” Austic said.

Vogel and Merwin also feel that demolishing the structure without assessing its condition would create waste. Community members have suggested ideas such as replacing handrails and footboards with safer composite material or coating the structure, Vogel said.

“To simply take it down, first puts all this material in the waste stream,” he said. “It's this sort of throw away mentality.”

Austic said the board of education would make the ultimate decision. The June 4 presentation is the first time the school board had heard from the committee.

“Our committee is just coming up with a proposal,” she said.