

The Community-Based Revitalization of the Ridgecrest Accessible Neighborhood Playground in Sudbury, Canada

Nicole Marie Yantzi

*School of the Environment
Laurentian University, Canada*

Joscelyne Landry-Altmann

Ward 12 Councillor and Deputy Mayor for the City of Greater Sudbury

Arthemise Camirand-Peterson

Ridgecrest Historian

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Abstract

In 2008 the Ridgecrest Neighbourhood Association was formed to revitalize the local 65-year-old playground, described at that time as being dormant and empty. The goals of this report are to reflect on the pivotal moments in the revitalization process, the roles of different individuals and organizations in the process, the rich history of community volunteerism, opportunities created by focusing on accessibility, and key lessons learned for other groups wishing to provide accessible play opportunities in their area. The paper's title uses the word revitalization in recognition of the playground being vital (1953 to mid-1980s), "dormant" as stated by a key informant (1980s to 2008), and again vital starting around 2010.

Keywords: neighborhood, playground, revitalization, accessibility, accessible play

Introduction

This is the story of the revitalization of a 65-year-old neighborhood playground in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, how accessibility became part of the vision for the playground, and the possibilities thereby created. The need to revitalize the playground was grounded in the 2006 election platform of a municipal councillor. The value of the playground is supported in the literature in terms of the ample physical and mental health impacts of neighborhood parks and greenspaces (Bell, Wilson, & Liu, 2008; Ginsburg, 2007; Sallis, Owen, & Fisher, 2008). Often these benefits are not shared equally, as natural or built outdoor environments can impose a multitude of barriers to physical activity for populations living with disabilities (Rimmer, Riley, Wang, Rauworth, & Jurkowski, 2004; Roemmich et al., 2006).

This field report contains rich reflections and experiences from three individuals involved in the 12-year revitalization of the playground. Dr. Nicole Yantzi was asked to join the project in 2008 as an unpaid consultant. In 2014 she began a research project with colleagues from the local Public Health Unit examining the use characteristics, resident and non-resident experiences and perceptions, and individual and community health impacts of the revitalized playground. The research project involved key informant interviews with members of the playground association, and questionnaires distributed to residents' mailboxes and to playground visitors at staggered times during the week and day. Selected findings are discussed throughout this report. Joscelyne Landry-Altmann has been the municipal councillor for the complete time of the project and her 2006 election platform included the revitalization of playgrounds in her ward. Since 2008 she has been a political champion for inclusive play opportunities in the city as a member of the Accessibility Advisory Panel. Arthemise Camirand-Peterson was one of the original members of the Ridgecrest Playground Association reinstated by Landry-Altmann. She is the historian and archivist for the playground and the neighborhood of New Sudbury in the city of Greater Sudbury.

Ridgecrest Playground before Revitalization (1953-2008)

During the peak years of 1953 to the mid-1980s, Ridgecrest Playground, named after the fast-emerging Ridgecrest subdivision that housed many young families, was a busy hub of activity during all seasons. It included a slide, swing set, outdoor skating rink and a field house for inside activities (see Figure 1). More than 2000 local children were signed up for winter playground activities like organized hockey and ringette, and at one time 25 senior-level hockey teams competed at Ridgecrest. Hundreds of children had access to daily summer arts and recreational programs free of charge; the supervisors were paid by the city. Parents were actively involved in organizing winter carnivals each year with challenges and games. Funds were raised by the community to purchase hockey sweaters, sports equipment, swings, teeter totters and other items. However, by the mid-1980s, the activities and popularity of Ridgecrest Playground began to diminish and the Ridgecrest Neighbourhood Association¹ was eventually dissolved.

¹ Lack of computerized files makes it difficult to know the exact name of the Association and when it was originally formed.

The Revitalization of Ridgecrest Playground (2006-2018)

Landry-Altmann decided to make the revitalization of playgrounds in her ward part of her 2006 municipal election platform. When deciding whether to run, she toured her potential ward and noticed the extremely poor condition of the playgrounds (Figure 1). In 2008, as the newly elected councillor, she distributed flyers in the area inviting residents and children to a preliminary meeting concerning the reinstatement of the Ridgecrest Playground Association (RPA). Public consultations ensured that all options were considered. Accessibility was not part of the revitalization process when it first began in 2008, but the public consultations for both adults and children provided the opportunity for the father of a child with a disability to request that his son (K) be able to play in his neighborhood park. A key informant interviewee confirms that "The defining moment [was deciding to] make it accessible. Absolutely."

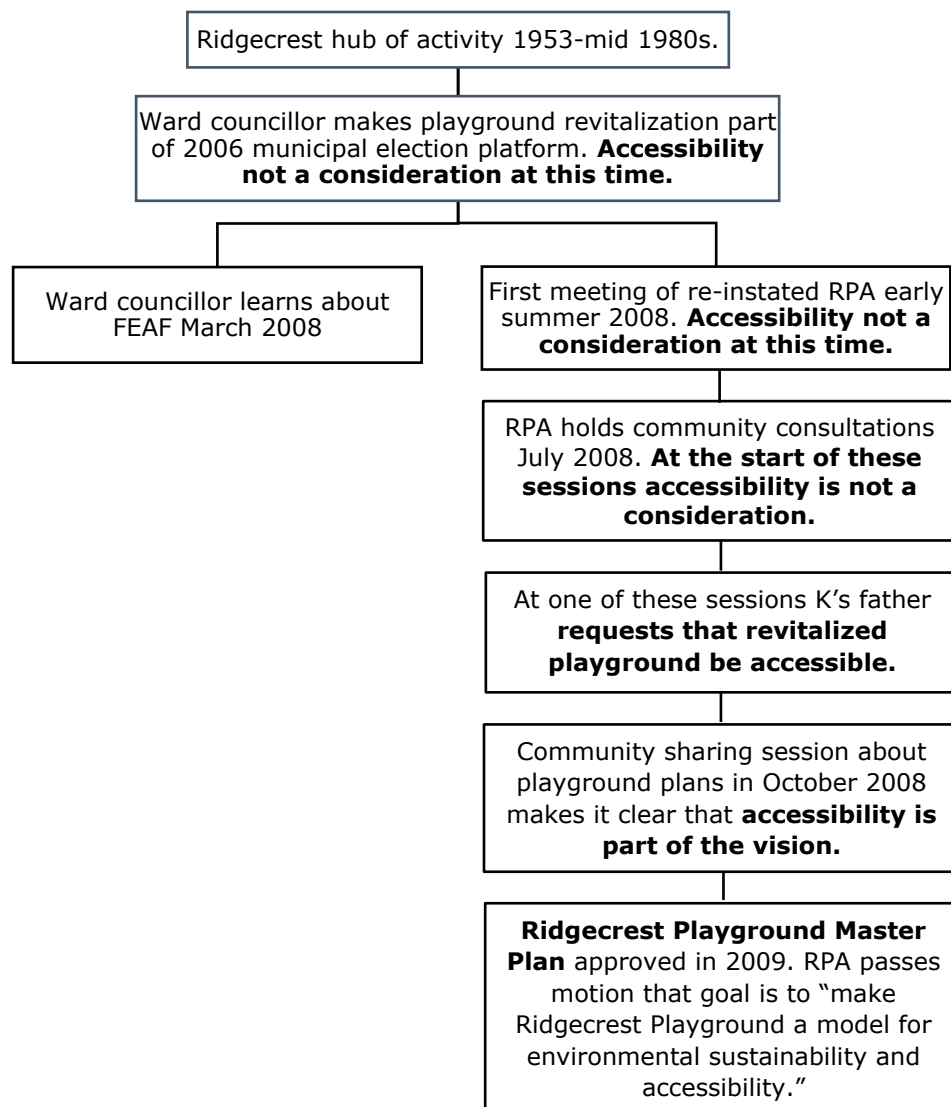
Figure 1. Ridgecrest Playground before revitalization



The complexity of the processes involved in the revitalization of Ridgecrest are represented in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 displays some of the key steps involved in changing the vision to embrace accessibility. Timing and networking played a pivotal role. Landry-Altmann went to a diversity luncheon in March 2008 and sat by someone who informed her that the Canadian federal government was starting a new funding source for accessibility called the Federal Enabling Accessibility Fund (FEAF). After discussing this opportunity with the RPA and gathering support from local organizations that work with people with disabilities, she went to city staff and told them about this new funding source. Although she met with resistance, an application was prepared in just three days in time to be submitted. This funding opportunity provided many opportunities that would not otherwise have been available.

Boys (2014) emphasizes that designing for accessibility must start early and be recognized as a lens of strength and possibility for creativity. Community consultations facilitated by the RPA emphasized the importance of accessibility fairly early in the process. An information handout for residents for a public event held in October 2008 both to raise funds and to receive community feedback states, “[I]t is the hope of the organizing committee that Ridgecrest playground will become—within a very short period of time—an ACCESSIBLE and environmentally-friendly place that will encourage the participation of local residents and visitors of all ages throughout the seasons” (original emphasis). The proposed plan for the new park along with pictures of the old park were displayed to help with the feedback process. The Ridgecrest Playground Master Plan, which was developed by the RPA and included input from the community, was approved in 2009 (Figure 2). In February of that year a letter thanking the Honourable Jim Flaherty, current Minister of Finance for Canada and proponent for the creation of the FEAF, stated that the RPA’s goal was to “make Ridgecrest Playground a model for environmental sustainability and accessibility, and that best practices be shared with other playgrounds in the region.”

Figure 2. Changing the vision to include accessibility



Revitalization of the playground occurred in four phases, each of which was supported with a FEAF grant (Figure 3). While the funding discussion of this report focuses on the opportunities provided by the FEAF it is important to acknowledge that funding also came from other sources. A land sale in the ward provided \$97,000, a portion of which was used to start the revitalization. Additional funding came from the RPA successfully petitioning for almost \$40,000 from a community ward fund. This petition was strengthened by city accessibility plans beginning in 2013-2014 focusing on opportunities for play for all; in the most recent plan it states, this "remains a key focus of the City of Greater Sudbury" (City of Greater Sudbury, 2017).

Figure 3. Phases in the revitalization of Ridgecrest Playground

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|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>Phase 1</u> : 2010 installation of accessible play structure and surface, walking paths, making field house accessible | Funding: Informed of \$50,000 FEAF September 2008, funds from sale of land in the ward allotted to the playground, community ward funds |
| <u>Phase 2</u> : 2011 surface retrofit for rink, new rink boards, exercise bars for everyone to use, grass covered hill | Funding: \$75,000 FEAF |
| <u>Phase 3</u> : 2014 accessible splash pad | Funding: \$50,000 FEAF |
| <u>Phase 4</u> : 2018 installation of gazebo and adult exercise equipment | Funding: \$28,000 FEAF, gazebo donated, use of ward funds to install gazebo |

Phase One, completed in 2010, used a \$50,000 FEAF grant to install an accessible play structure on a packed fiber-chip ground cover, swings, walking path, and benches, as well as to redesign the field house to meet accessibility standards. Budget considerations led to the use of wood chip ground cover instead of a rubber surface, but now the RPA realizes that this was a mistake. Children from the neighborhood were invited to look at different designs and suggested preferred color schemes. K, the inspiration for embracing accessibility in the vision of the park, was presented with an accessible bucket swing. It was the first time that he was able to go from his walker to a swing without assistance. While this represented a momentous opportunity for the 5-year old, the benefits extended well beyond this one child. A survey of the Ridgecrest area for the Phase One FEAF application noted many homes with ramps, including four homes for individuals with developmental disabilities and also a residential home for individuals with autism that had a backyard gate with access to the playground. A rough count by the RPA after the completion of Phase One showed summer attendance in 2010 of 50-60 people during weekdays and up to 150 people per day during weekends. At this point Ridgecrest Playground became known as Ridgecrest Accessible Playground.

Phase Two involved a \$75,000 FEAF grant in March 2011 for a surface retrofit to the recreational facility that enabled wheelchair basketball and sledge hockey. The goal was to provide more opportunities for integrated sports for the whole community. This phase also included new rink boards, extra swing bays, exercise

bars for individuals with disabilities, and a grass covered hill for running up and rolling down in the summer and sledding in the winter.

In Phase Three, a FEAF grant of \$50,000 was used to build an accessible splash pad, the first of its kind in Greater Sudbury. In a 2014 newspaper article celebrating the grand opening of the splash pad, K said that “I wasn’t expecting a water park but now when it’s hot we can cool off and have fun and be splashed” (Bryne, 2014).

Phase Four will see the completion of the revitalization of Ridgecrest Accessible Playground with a focus on some shade opportunities and adult exercise equipment. This provision addresses research findings that revealed limited shade opportunities and few opportunities available for adult recreation. One resident without children remarked in the residential questionnaire that there is “nothing of interest to our age group.” A funding announcement of \$28,000 from the FEAF in April 2018 will provide adult outdoor exercise equipment, and community funds will be used to install a donated shade structure.

The generous funding through the FEAF of more than \$200,000 would not have been possible without the incorporation of accessibility into the plan for Ridgecrest Playground. The FEAF

provides funding for eligible capital projects that increase accessibility for people with disabilities in Canadian communities and workplaces, creating more opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in community activities, programs and services, or access employment opportunities (Government of Canada, 2018).

The applications for these funds all stress that the playground will benefit children with and without disabilities, as well as parents, grandparents and other relatives with and without disabilities. The application itself comes from the municipality, with the need identified by the city councillor for the ward following a collective request generated by the RPA, Ward 12 Community Action Network volunteers, and community organizations who use the space with their clients with disabilities.

All phases involved various community groups working together, with a very strong volunteer base. In a 2014 newspaper article, Landry-Altmann estimated that the revitalization (Phases One through Three) had involved 2,500 volunteer hours (Bryne, 2014). One of the FEAF application questions asks how the community will benefit from greater participation and contribution from people with disabilities. The response on the application for Phase Three demonstrates the overall goal for the revitalization project:

the community will benefit from supporting children in the early years and actively build a community where persons with disabilities have the same opportunities for play as their peers. Creating a communal gathering place for multiple generations to enjoy fosters relationships, community pride and belongingness.

The Association logo, found in the field house, depicts the name change which emphasizes accessibility, and all of the values important to Ridgecrest Accessible Playground (Figure 4). An excerpt from an interview with Landry-Altmann shows the link between the change in vision and funding:

A part of my platform was to overtake the playgrounds. We made a deal that there would be a new play structure.... At first we were just thinking of a swing. But as we started looking at accessibility we started meeting more people with the same interest and with that, came money. Vision came from that, money, grants.

This is an extremely important point as too often accessibility is considered a burden and extra expense. In the case of Ridgecrest Accessible Playground, the funding that came from embracing accessibility actually created a revitalized play and gathering space that everyone can enjoy.

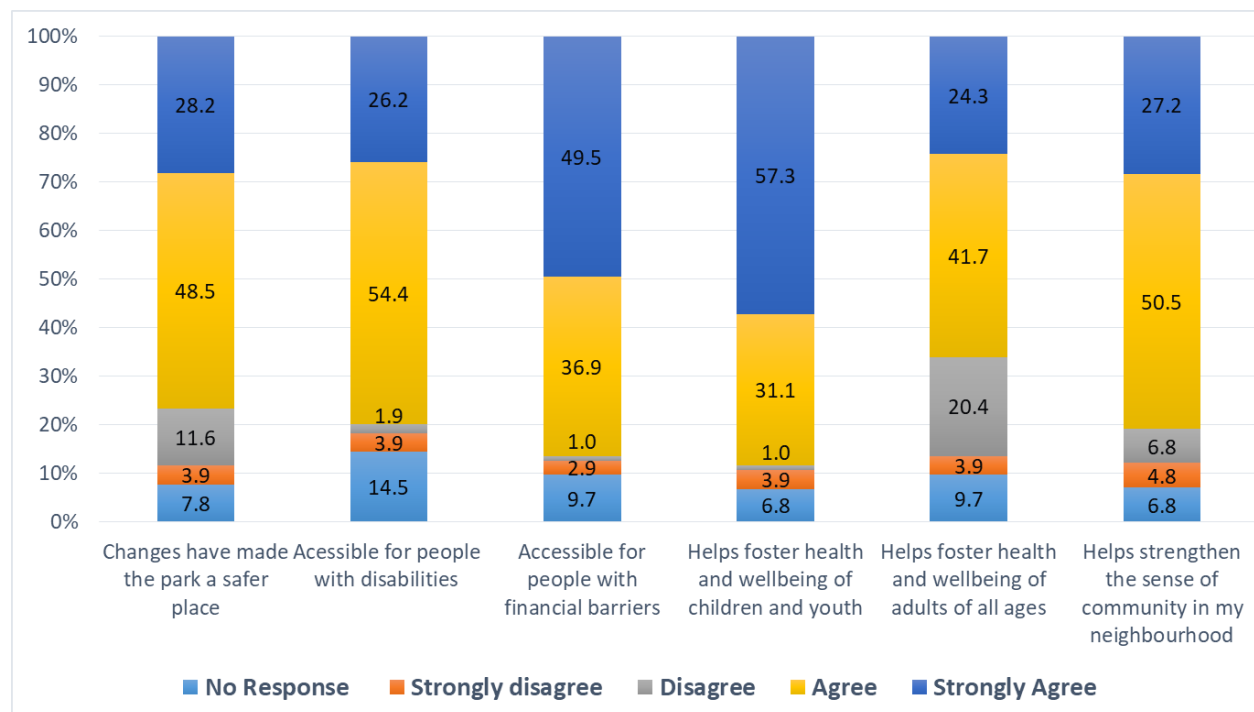
Figure 4. Ridgecrest Playground after revitalization



What Do Residents Think about Ridgecrest Playground?

Of the 117 participants who indicated in a residential questionnaire that they had visited the playground, approximately 66 percent used it more frequently since the revitalization began in 2008. Overall ratings were also very high, with adults scoring it an average of 8.2/10 and young people scoring it 8.3/10. Findings show that while accessibility is an important feature of the park, the revitalization has provided many other individual and community benefits. The sense of community pride and strengthening of community engagement is evident in the survey results depicted in Figure 5. Two different research participants said it best: "More local people in the park gives a sense of a vibrant community" and "I belong to this community and places like Ridgecrest add to my community pride." Results from the questionnaires completed with people visiting the playground also found that several non-residents came to enjoy the playground. This was further confirmed by statements in the residential questionnaires such as, "People from all over Greater Sudbury come to visit our park."

Figure 5. Perceived impact of the changes at Ridgecrest Playground (n=104 adults)



The artwork surrounding the playground, painted by local young people, shows how accessibility and inclusion are part of both the vision and the reality of the space. One of the murals depicts K using his walker at the playground, with the artist recently reflecting that:

[T]his was the first park that I was aware of that was built towards being completely accessible to anyone no matter what disabilities they have.... Ridgecrest is a park I can remember playing at as a young child, losing track

of hours playing on swings, in the sand, or running around in the grass. It was pure bliss. To become a part of a project that now allows all children to be able to enjoy these simple pleasures in life was a heartwarming and uplifting experience (D. Provencher, personal communication, April 19, 2018).

The vision of the Ridgecrest Accessible Neighbourhood Playground Association (RANPA, the official name adopted by the city) has been recognized and celebrated by two major municipal awards. In November 2010 the RANPA was awarded the Healthy Community Recognition Award and in April 2013 it received the Civic Award for Volunteerism. The letter accompanying the award stated that RANPA

[s]aw a need based on the demographics of their neighbourhood. They developed a vision, created a plan, and completed many renovations resulting in an inclusive play space and community gathering area. The Association went above and beyond to ensure that everyone has access to the park regardless of their age, physical, intellectual and cognitive abilities.

In recognition of the hard work and commitment of the volunteers the letter continues, “[T]his park is built on a solid volunteer foundation. The spirit of volunteerism is alive and well at Ridgecrest Park and has been for the past 60 years” (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Some RANPA volunteers with the Civic Award for Volunteerism



Lessons Learned

In 2018, with the conclusion of the revitalization, Ridgecrest Accessible Playground remains the only accessible *neighbourhood* playground in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. The other accessible playgrounds are surrounded by recreational high-use areas with numerous soccer and football fields, used for local games and regional tournaments, but not centered in a neighborhood. From the very beginning the RPA sought out residents' feedback and ideas. The notes concerning the community

launch of the revitalization in 2008 talk about the need “to encourage children and youth and seniors (in particular) to play a meaningful role in the development of this community resource and to provide an initial opportunity to build this sense of engagement/ownership.” The Association followed a key tenet for meaningful participation that requires individuals of different ages, socio-economic statuses and abilities to be brought into the process as early as possible. This is aligned with the assertion that

[I]nstead of looking at playground equipment catalogs and listening to sales people looking to make a profit, community officials should consult their residents and research findings to develop the best playground for all children in their community (Stanton-Chapman & Schmidt, 2017, p. 134).

After the completion of each of the phases the Association held community celebrations which included sharing information about the revitalization progress, activities for children and adults and also the sharing of food. It was pitched as a way to celebrate the changes that were happening. All three authors attended these celebrations and witnessed the diversity of people with disabilities who were present. These celebrations also created an opportunity to raise people’s awareness of accessibility and inclusion.

The story of the revitalization of Ridgecrest Playground is one in which accessibility can be seen as catalyst for positive change. The adaptation of the vision opened up new possibilities for funding and community engagement. It should be acknowledged that the FEAF funding did not just create a playground for children with disabilities, it also provides an enriched playground for children without disabilities and for multi-generational enjoyment. New opportunities continue with para-nordic training occurring at the playground for the last two years, which also served as a training site for Colin Cameron, recent medalist at the 2018 Winter Paralympics. The accessible amenities mean that it is the only location where an integrated and fully bilingual summer city camp program is offered. A youth artist poignantly said it best: “Ridgecrest is truly a playground for everyone” (Figure 7).

Figure 7. A playground for everyone



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Dr. Nicole Yantzi is an associate professor in the School of the Environment at Laurentian University and current director of the Evaluating Children's Health Outcomes research center at Laurentian University. Dr. Yantzi has worked collaboratively with school boards, service providers and municipalities, and children and families to evaluate and improve the accessibility and inclusiveness of children's built environments. Another area of focus is advocating for the inclusion of all children and youth as active research participants and valuing their ideas for change.

Joscelyne Landry Altmann was born and raised in the City of Greater Sudbury. In 2006 she entered the race for municipal councillor for ward 12 in Greater Sudbury and has been re-elected consecutively for three terms. She has also proudly served as Deputy Mayor since 2010. She has been a member of the Municipal Accessibility Advisory Panel since 2008. Ridgecrest Accessible Park development remains a top achievement and it has been her privilege to meet and work with such generous and good-hearted volunteers. Together, they have changed the makeup of the Ridgecrest neighborhood and improved the quality of life for many.

Arthemise Camirand-Peterson is an active local historian, archivist and author. She has been president of the New Sudbury Community Action Network Ward 12 and the Ridgecrest Accessible Neighbourhood Association. She has spent countless hours interviewing people and searching for memorabilia to document the history of the New Sudbury area of the Greater City of Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, including Ridgecrest Playground. This culminated in the authorship of the book published in English and French entitled, *New Sudbury Not as New as You Think* and *Le Nouveau Sudbury pas si nouveau que l'on pense*.

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