



## **Changes in parks enhance accessibility**

**Link:** <http://bit.ly/2WhTzKQ>

By Guimel Sibingo

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COLUMBIA — Michael Bishop said he lived in Columbia for 22 years before he visited Stephens Lake Park for the first time on his own in a wheelchair.

Before the city built a new sidewalk in the park, Bishop had to use the streets to get to the Walmart on Conley Road.

"That was dangerous," he said. Now he has a safe route using the sidewalks along College Avenue and Broadway, and in the park, to get to the store. He said he has become a regular patron of Stephens Lake Park.

Bishop is one of many Columbia residents with disabilities who have benefited from an effort by the Columbia Parks and Recreation Department to make its parks and other facilities more accessible.

### **Starting point: Changes in the Americans with Disabilities Act**

In 2010, new rules under the Americans with Disabilities Act called for installing lifts in swimming pools, making sidewalks wheelchair accessible and making doors at least 36 inches wide so that wheelchairs not only can pass through them, but also have enough space to turn around.

The city hired consultants to assess the accessibility of its parks and to identify the changes that needed to be made. Then the Parks and Recreation Department launched a capital construction program designed to bring facilities into compliance with the act's standards.

The program is supported by the park sales tax, which was approved by city voters in 2000, when Columbia bought the Stephens Lake property. The revenue from the tax turned out to be about \$13 million instead of the projected \$12 million. The surplus is being used to further enhance accessibility.

So far, the city has made changes to 136 items in 17 parks and recreation facilities. The changes include lowering door handles by 3 inches and bathroom mirrors by 1.5 inches and adding mulch to playgrounds to make them easier for children with disabilities to enjoy.

Some changes go beyond the federal requirements. The sidewalks will be built 6 feet wide, for example, which exceeds the suggested width of 4 to 5 feet.

Parks and Recreation Director Mike Griggs said some amendments in the guidelines — such as changing the slopes of concrete in parking lots from 3 percent to less than 2 percent — require the city to renovate entire parking lots. Because they remain accessible, though, the changes can wait until the parking lots are scheduled for repaving or renovation, Griggs said.

Pool lifts and the accessibility of new facilities such as Barberry Park, which is in the western part of city and scheduled for development this fiscal year, are a priority, Griggs said.

### **Cost: Less than the budgeted amount**

The city has budgeted about \$632,274 in its capital improvement budget for the changes. [The compliance plan is broken into five phases:](#)

- Phase 1 (2012): - \$157,240cq
- Phase 2 (2013): - \$151,820cq
- Phase 3 (2014): - \$100,000cq
- Phase 4 (2015): - \$223,214cq
- Phase 5 (2017): - \$207,000cq checked math

The city has spent \$323,256 of the \$632,274 that was budgeted for the first four phases and was able to make changes in 17 parks and recreation facilities, Griggs said. Because the parks sales tax is scheduled to expire in March 2016, there is no funding source yet for 2017 projects. Griggs said he hopes voters will renew the tax and that accessibility projects will likely appear on the list of proposed projects for the ballot issue.

Griggs said the city has been able to remain under budget because much of the work required under the Americans with Disabilities Act has lined up with park maintenance and construction projects that were already funded.

The city, for example, had planned a complete renovation of the Cosmopolitan Park playground before the new standards came out, and \$500,000 of the budget for that work was included in the 2010 sales tax proposal. The renovation allowed the department to fix several features of the 30-year-old playground that did not meet the new standards, including surfacing, play equipment and access routes.

The Columbia Disabilities Commission recognized the project as a priority and recommended the city use \$18,000 of its \$100,000 budget surplus to add more accessibility features, making the total budget for the work \$518,000. The new playground will have no wood mulch. Most of its surface will be solid rubber and rubber mulch, which is softer and more durable than wood.

Griggs said the ultimate goal is that all the Parks and Recreation Department's outdoor and indoor facilities comply with the new standards of Americans with Disabilities Act by the end of fiscal year 2017.

### **Feedback: Community responds to the changes**

Not everyone is entirely satisfied with the city's compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Scout Merry, accessibility service manager at Services for Independent Living, said that although the city has done a lot, the accessibility of parks and recreation facilities is not perfect. Merry said some wheelchair users he knows have a hard time navigating the wood chips in some parks.

Mark Ohrenberg, the community services and youth advocate for Services for Independent Living, said the surfaces of paths, parking lots and curb cuts in some parks must be improved.

Ohrenberg, who uses a manual wheelchair, finds it difficult to get around some parks. Sometimes he needs a push on the paths at Stephens Lake Park.

"I don't have tons of strength, and so I need the surfacing to be as flat as possible," he said. "When it's not that, it challenges me some. If it's smooth, I can get through."

Ohrenberg hasn't tried the park's bathrooms, but he said he is pleased with the drinking fountains.

Bishop said the changes the city has made have helped him a lot. He likes to use the trail at Albert-Oakland Park to take strolls in his wheelchair.

"The gravel wasn't too loose, so it wouldn't be hard to roll in those parks," he said of the more accessible trails.

Bishop has suffered from a head injury since he was involved in a car accident at 16. He has used a wheelchair since 1990, but he's determined to get the strength back in his legs.

"That's why I'm working out all the time," he said.

Twice a week, Bishop trains at Gold's Gym with trainer Mary Love, but in the summer they like to use the fitness stations at Albert-Oakland Park. The accessible paths there help him get around, and he uses the rails on the bridge to practice walking. He can use his wheelchair to climb paths with slight upward slopes, which Love said also makes him stronger.

"A lot of people might feel it's too embarrassing to go to the gym and can't afford it," Love said.

She said the park has become a good alternative.

*Supervising editor is [Scott Swafford](#).*