

Palmerston North's Junior Road Safety Park

Achieving the Best Fit

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Abstract

On 25 November 2017 the Junior Road Safety Park was officially opened and a flood of children raced onto the tarsealed track. The occasion marked over three years of work by the community and Council staff. The focus of this paper and the oral presentation is to describe the design-led thinking that has helped shape the popular attraction.

Palmerston North City Council was originally approached in 2014 by two local mums, Allannah Radich and Tash Collins, who had used a similar track at Marine Parade in Napier. Their brief was simple - they also wanted a simulated road layout for children to have fun and to help teach road safety skills. Over the next three years they built momentum through a Facebook page and advocated for the facility through the media and other networks. Their commitment and patience are two key features of the success of the project.

For the Palmerston North City Council another core element of success was the place-based focus on the design and layout of the track. It is located in a leafy spot within the City's premiere park, the Victoria Esplanade. In this high profile location it had to be executed well and this pressure underpinned the multi-discipline approach to its delivery.

Introduction

On 25 November 2017 Palmerston North City's first Junior Road Safety Park (JRSP) was opened to the public at the Victoria Esplanade. Over 1000 people attended the event and it marked over 3 years of work stemming from an idea by two community members in 2014 who wanted the City to develop something like the one on Marine Parade in Napier.

This paper focuses on the approach the author took in promoting a 'place-based' approach to the evolution of the facility, particularly in the last two years leading up to its commissioning. Many principles of good urban design were employed in this approach and the opportunity is taken to share those learnings in this paper and the accompanying oral presentation at the conference.

As a guide usage estimates indicate at least 1000 people a week regularly visit the JRSP derived from numerous observations by Council staff and two one hour 'snapshot' surveys undertaken on 17 January 2018 (late morning school holidays 73 people) and later on 5 February 2018 (after school 49 people). It is also noted as part of the 'snapshot' surveys user satisfaction was discussed and the overwhelming feedback was positive. This is also consistent with feedback received through other forums.

The Facility

The JRSP track is over 500m long with a 3m wide tarsealed surface laid out in what can loosely be described as a 'cloverleaf' shape. A number of miniaturised features found commonly on the road network are located along the track including a central roundabout, traffic lights, traffic islands and give-way intersections. A children's 'pump track' (compacted dirt track with turns and bumps) also connects into the JRSP to add to the experience. A landscape plan is included in **Appendix 1** showing the approved design.

The primary benefit of the facility was originally viewed in it playing a role in teaching children (target age about 2-10 years old) valuable road safety skills in a simulated road environment. A secondary benefit, and byproduct, has been around children having fun and being active, which influenced the design evolution process.

Delivery Process

The process, from the initial idea to completing the facility, took over three years from when it started in 2014. The project was principally driven by Allannah Radich and Tash Collins with fundraising support from the Pascal Street Community Trust. A Facebook page (www.facebook.com/juniorroadsafetypark) was set up to test the idea, and quickly gained support

through 'likes' and many positive comments. Offers of assistance both in terms of materials and 'in-kind' labour also came in from local building companies and local contractors respectively.

Mrs Radich and Mrs Collins pitched their idea to Council officers from the Community Safety, Parks and Roding Teams, and it was unanimously supported. From this point officers gained approval for a specific site and seed funding of \$100,000 from Council. Later, private funding commitment was achieved through the Trust coming on board and led to the completion of the \$450,000 facility.

The Setting

The JRSP is located in the Victoria Esplanade ('Esplanade') on its eastern side, adjacent to Fitzherbert Avenue, an arterial road, as shown in Figure 1 below. The site was formally occupied by a curators' cottage that was rented out by Council for many years. However this was demolished in 2015 as a result of the 6.2 magnitude earthquake centred close to Eketahuna in 2014. The JRSP lies at the far end of a series of playgrounds but is separated from them by a large off-street carpark.



Figure 1 – The Junior Road Safety Park location with the Victoria Esplanade

The Victoria Esplanade was originally founded in 1897 and is one of the City's most popular parks - attracting around 600,000 visitors a year. It is located on the true right bank of the Manawatu River and a short 20 minute walk, 10 minute drive, or 7 minute cycle, south of the City Centre. The 26-hectare park was laid out in the Victorian style with highly structured areas and generous boulevards.

It is characterised by its very leafy setting with a large tract of regenerating native bush next to the river and mature trees spread throughout.

The most popular features within the Esplanade include the miniature railway, world-class Dugald McKenzie Rose Gardens, Peter Black Conservatory, and large playgrounds. A new Central Energy Trust Wildbase Recovery facility is nearing completion in the middle of the park and is expected to be opened in late 2018. This will be a rehabilitation facility for birds that have been treated nearby at the Massey University Wildbase animal hospital.

Just beyond the western end of the Esplanade works are well underway on the He Ara Kotahi bridge a pedestrian/cycle bridge linking the Manawatu River Pathway on both sides of the river. This is due to be opened in early 2019.

Site Selection

The author was involved in canvassing up to 20 parks within Palmerston North in 2014 as a potential location for the JRSP. This was undertaken in-house with advice from the Rooding and City Safety Teams independent from the community representatives.

The key considerations for the initial canvassing included:

- A high profile and safe location
- Near existing facilities
- Supported active transportation
- Highly accessible
- Workable in terms of construction

At the first cut 6 parks were identified for further consideration and the services of the Via Strada consultancy were employed for a detailed assessment based on 20 criteria. These ranged from physical location, servicing and network connection factors right through to non-physical factors such as user demand, consenting and Council Strategy alignment. The former curator's site at the Esplanade emerged as the preferred option followed by a site next to an existing skatepark at the Railway Land Reserve near the City Centre.

In October 2014 the Esplanade former curator's site was approved by the Community Development Committee and adopted by the full Council later that month along with a \$100,000 contribution to kick start fundraising efforts. The general view of members was consistent with officer recommendations that the site benefitted from being very high profile – being close to the Manawatu River (and shared path network) and Fitzherbert Avenue and already featured an excellent range of existing facilities for families to use nearby. Some cautionary comments were expressed around achieving a good fit in the leafy and highly valued setting of the Esplanade. This was a key signal that influenced a heavy emphasis on 'place-based' design ethos.

Policy Context

Many documents make up the policy context for assessment of the suitability of the JRSP. For the purposes of this paper the focus is on those which guided the 'place-based' approach adopted by the author.

Table 1 – Key Assessment Documents

Urban Design Strategy for Palmerston North (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies 5 key urban design initiatives (public realm, diversity, connectivity, character and environment) • Sets out a range of initiatives to give effect to the drivers and thereby improve the appearance of the City
Manawatu River Framework (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a strategic vision for any developments located in close proximity to the Manawatu River • Includes 6 design principles (continuity, high quality, context, coordination, engagement, prioritisation) for assessment of projects
Manawatu Active Transport Strategy (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The vision is to get more Manawatu people and visitors using active transport more often for travel, health and enjoyment • Identifies 4 'E's' (Engineering, Encouragement, Enforcement and Education) to assign primary roles to various agencies involved

When the JRSP was first proposed by Mrs Radich and Mrs Collins, Council officers quickly established it would meet the vision and underlying objectives of the Manawatu Active Transport Strategy. While there are a range of trails in the City and schools regularly provide cycle safety and skills courses, there was nothing that could be described as a dedicated facility of this nature. The facility would therefore fill a 'gap in the market' and the focus switched to the approval process and fundraising to be undertaken to achieve it.

Initially there was not a lot of discussion around alignment to the Urban Design Strategy. However, the proposal was reviewed favorably by an Urban Design Working Group and Council officers were aware of the preparation of the Manawatu River Framework – an initiative recommended by the strategy. As the discussions turned to site selection, the author highlighted achieving a best fit design and layout in the context of the wider setting, rather than the engineering design of the JRSP itself.

Regulatory Context

The Esplanade lies within the Recreation Zone of the Palmerston North City District Plan. While the JRSP was provided for as a permitted activity in the zone it required resource consent for non-compliance issues with building and parking rules.

Consent was granted in May 2016 subject to 9 conditions. The key requirement was a condition seeking the development of a detailed landscape plan. As with other signals through the process, this requirement under the Resource Management Act 1991 reiterated the importance of achieving a best fit in that setting.

Place-Based Approach

In the view of the author the successful delivery of the JRSP became contingent on three main factors (in no particular order) with the assumption made that funding would be achieved from the community:

1. Best fit in the setting of the Victoria Esplanade.
2. Fit for purpose in terms of future users of the facility.
3. Ensuring that contractors delivered on the agreed vision.

At the time of the resource consent being granted there was generally a clear picture of the technical design of the JRSP itself stemming from original plan prepared by Via Strada. This is included in **Appendix 2**. The layout of the road and range of simulated features was exciting and received supportive comments from the 3000+ followers on the JRSP Facebook page that Mrs Radich and Mrs Collins regularly updated.

However, a significant gap was identified through the resource consent assessment whereby there was no landscape plan for around the track itself. This was considered a big risk to the success of the project, particularly considering comments made by elected members. The strategy direction only strengthening the need to consider the setting and context of the Esplanade.

A place-based approach, one focused on the local context, was promoted by the author to ensure that the design evolved to address the risk. The key moves to achieve this were:

- Emphasising the importance of considering the setting and determining that landscape architecture expertise was needed for the project; and
- Gaining support from Mrs Radich, Mrs Collins and the Pascal Street Community Trust that this approach was crucial to the project's success; and
- Promoting a collaborative, multi-discipline working approach with all parties involved;

Once support had been achieved from these parties a request for proposal process was undertaken and Bespoke Landscape Architects were appointed for the detailed design stage. They

were asked to keep the original track design but look for opportunities to improve the experience noting the target audience was children learning valuable road safety skills while having fun and keeping active.

Outcomes and Learnings

The key outcome of bringing in specialist landscape architecture advice was an immediate change in focus from pure engineering design to considerations around the setting. Many positive benefits were observed:

- A greater understanding and respect for the history of the Victoria Esplanade became evident;
- The author and other internal staff adopted a broader view of how the JRSP facility would add to the Manawatu River experience drawn from the key directives of the Manawatu River Framework;
- There was acceptance that the track needed to simulate closely the road environment, however, it did not have to be a perfect scaled down representation to achieve the same road safety learnings;
- Additional amenity features including themed seating and landscaping, planting, a large shelter, bike stands and a 'fix it' station were prioritised for inclusion from when the facility was opened as opposed to the temptation to delay things for funding reasons to a later date;
- More discussions were held around the desired appearance and an element of competition crept in with the Napier JRSP (which was originally used as the benchmark) whereby the author wanted to create a facility that was unique to Palmerston North;

The most significant issue with the project was the degree of creative tension that arose between staff members. Through its delivery lifecycle the JRSP project involved many officers and, as such, there were times when opinions differed. However, these issues were worked through based on respect for each other's views and ultimately a collaborative approach. During this period of tension, the author also took a greater leadership role in driving the project and tried to focus on everyone's passion for it to succeed.

From the standpoint of learnings around inclusive design, the author considers that bringing in specialist landscape advice added a lot of value especially in a sensitive setting of this nature. However, it is noted that this would not necessarily apply to all projects.

The key learning was the importance of promoting earlier discussions, and site visits, with a range of professional disciplines and community members in the mix. This would likely have led to a quicker appreciation of each other's views, an earlier formation of a shared vision and likely a clearer way forward.

Conclusions

The high-quality appearance of Palmerston North's Junior Road Safety Park along with its popularity and positive feedback from users is a testament to the great working relationship between community representatives Allanah Radich, Tash Collins, Pascal Street Community Trust and Council.

Council officers and consultants played an important role in shaping the community vision for children to learn road safety skills and have fun doing it. The construction team delivered on that vision and the facility is now being carefully maintained by Victoria Esplanade operations staff.

The author has outlined in this paper the evolution of a 'place-based' design approach guided by the Manawatu River Framework for the Victoria Esplanade JRSP. The result is a facility that fits comfortably in its surroundings and improves the experience of the space that was previously not accessible to the public.

The project can be assessed overall as a good example of inclusive design. Council officers were open to adapting the design of the facility as new information came to light to achieve the best fit. And community members played a lead role communicating the status of the project along the way and thereby keeping a high level of enthusiasm through their dedicated Facebook page.

Author Statement - The author declares no competing financial interests.

Appendix 1 – Final Developed Design for Junior Road Safety Park (Bespoke 2017)

bespoke
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS



LANDSCAPE PLAN
1:400 @ A3

PALMERSTON NORTH JUNIOR BIKE PARK | Palmerston North
 REV A
 15/02/2017
01

- KEY**
- 01. Proposed shelter with seating under shelter
 - 02. 1.5m Footpath connections
 - 03. Proposed car port bike rack. (refer to images)
 - 04. Proposed dual horizontal tilt bin with timber batten body
 - 05. Proposed 2m entry path link from Fitzherbert avenue
 - 06. Proposed picnic bench location, picnic bench design to match existing at playground area (refer to images)
 - 07. Proposed drinking fountain with bottle refill location (refer to images)
 - 08. Junior road bike tracks with road surface marking
 - 09. Proposed planter bed seating area with compacted gravel surface ground
 - 10. Low level pump style bike track for age 2-6 (under development)
 - 11. Existing shed to be repurposed as bike storage area
 - 12. Existing shed with walls removed on two side acting as a bike pass through
 - 13. Proposed paved connection to existing playground
 - 14. Existing carpark area with carparking bays direction reversed
- Existing trees
 - Traffic signal location
 - Boland way finding signage location
 - Blade directional signage location
 - Plinth information signage location
 - Existing water outlet location
 - Power outlet location
 - Lawn
 - Planted area
 - Exposed aggregate pathway
 - Asphalt bike track
 - Gravel pump track
 - Kerb and channel
 - Proposed rain garden areas

Appendix 2 – Original Junior Road Safety Park concept (Via Strada 2014)

