



## Skateboarding In Tacoma: Youth Reclaim Public Space through Dialogue and Cooperative Planning<sup>1</sup>

*This narrative is one out of 15 that were originally developed in 2007 as part of a project on innovative policies for social inclusion jointly developed by the Development Planning Unit (DPU), University College London with the Committee on Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy (CSIPD) of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). This narrative was complemented and edited in 2010 by the Centre for Social Studies, Coimbra University (CES), to a standard format for the Observatory on Social Inclusion and Participatory Democracy.*

**Name of the policy:** Program to Empower Marginalized Youth through Community Action and Inclusion ('Skatepark Program')

**Start date:** early 2002

**Completion date:** Ongoing

### CONTEXT

#### GOVERNMENTAL CONTEXT

##### City context

The City of Tacoma, in Washington State, is located in the northwest corner of the United States on Puget Sound. In 2007, the city's estimated population was 201,000, with 36% of the

<sup>1</sup> The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** is a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. It contains over sixty case studies on innovative policies for community development, access to basic services, gender equality, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty, among others. The initiative has been developed with the scientific support of Prof. Yves Cabannes from the University College of London (15 case studies) and a team of researchers from the Centre for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra, which has worked under the supervision of Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (50 study cases). This Observatory aims to identify and investigate successful experiences that might inspire other cities to design and implement their own social inclusion policies.

The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** has been created by the Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights of UCLG. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is the global platform that represents and defends the interests of local governments before the international community and works to give cities more political influence on global governance. The **Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights** aims to contribute to building a common voice for the cities of UCLG in the areas of social inclusion, participatory democracy and human rights. It also aims to guide local governments in designing these policies and to that end, fosters political debates, the exchange of experiences and peer learning among cities around the world.

For more information: [www.uclg.org/cisdp/observatory](http://www.uclg.org/cisdp/observatory)





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population (in the 2000 census) under the age of 25 (Pletsch 2007: 2). In 2007, over half of the students enrolled in Tacoma Public Schools were from a minority background, all of which make up the diversity of the estimated 8,000 skateboarders in the City.

### **Government decentralization context**

The City of Tacoma and Metro Parks Tacoma are separate entities. Capital financing is enabled through the public approval of public bonds.

**Institutional level of policy development:** Submunicipal (downtown) and Municipal

## **SOCIAL CONTEXT**

### **Skateboarding**

Skateboarding is a popular activity with local youth and young adults. Skateboarding youth participate in this activity with or without dedicated skate spaces. As a result, in many communities without skateparks or with inadequate skateparks (either through lack of coverage or poor design), skateboarding youth recreate in the streets and other inappropriate areas. In areas where skateparks and skateboarding areas are plentiful and designed properly, skateboarders recreate in an appropriate space and are significantly less likely to sustain life-ending injuries. In 2006, 2 skateboarders were critically injured in skateparks compared to 27 that were killed while recreating in an inappropriate area.

Skateboarding is a challenging physical and mental activity where the barriers to improvement are almost entirely internal. Skateboarding empowers youth through constant, self-adopted challenges which can be overcome through practice, dedication, and commitment. These traits, learned through skateboarding, last a lifetime and are relevant to many environments and life situations.

Skateboarding activity and culture struggles to be recognized by public agencies and the broader community, and thus the skaters may become marginalized members of the community.

## **COMPREHENSIVE NARRATIVE**

### **Description of the policy**

The Skatepark Program plans and develops a network of public spaces designed for skateboarding, in a close collaborative planning process between the skateboarding community and Metro Parks Tacoma, the parks authority for the region. Through the program, the City aims to empower skateboarding youth in the community and instill greater appreciation and support for skateboarders within the broader community.

### **Background / Origins**

A common saying in the skate community goes something along the lines of 'if your city doesn't have a skatepark, then your city is a skatepark', which was precisely the problem. For years skateboarders had claimed the downtown area; it was the misappropriation of space, but no one used it so no one cared. With the arrival of local urban regeneration economic policy that



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attracted new corporate businesses into the core, skateboarding downtown was no longer ignored. At the urging of downtown businesses, who were constantly shooing away what they considered a destructive nuisance, the Business Improvement Association, a private non-profit corporation responsible for the management of downtown stakeholders, complained to the City. In 2003 the City of Tacoma began exploring a ban on all skateboarding activity in the recently revitalized city core.

At this point, a local skateboarding advocacy group was formed and meetings were organized between city officials and disgruntled skateboarders to discuss reconciliatory and solution-minded options for business leaders and the skateboard community (Skaters for Public Skateparks 2005). Bi-monthly meetings began taking place between the local government and local skateboarders. Within a few months the most vocal anti-skateboarding stakeholders were contacted and face-to-face meetings began taking place to address the 'problem' of skateboarding. Skaters for Public Skateparks, a national organization that became the key advocate for the skateboarding community, also began educating adversaries about the lack of space provided for skateboarders and offer solutions to mitigate the problem. By supplying a variety of options, SPS was able to create alliances between the skateboard community and the business community and, gradually, a trust was built between the two groups as the latter began to understand the dilemma faced by the skateboarding community and began working in collaboration (SPS 2005). Many of the business leaders began to understand the problem of inadequate space, began to see the activity in a whole new light, started advocating for central skateboarding spots, and encouraged skateboarders to develop a plan. Metro Parks Tacoma backed the plan and gave creative license to SPS: the skateboarders were now the planners; responsible for selecting sites and designing places for skateboarders.

### **Policy objectives**

Primary goals:

- To enlist and engage skateboarding youth in the creation of skate spaces that the whole community may benefit from.
- To encourage mutual respect and appreciation and to realize the talents (gifts) of each citizen.

Secondary goals include:

- To build greater acknowledgement and appreciation of un-programmed youth activities, particularly skateboarding, BMX bicycling, and inline skating, within the spatial and social context of active urban environments.
- To create built environments that promote social inclusion, social diversity, and are designed to maximize economic return through sustainable building practices and best design practices.

### **Chronological development and implementation of the practice**

The development of this practice occurred along two (interlinked) paths: (1) developing a global strategic plan and obtaining financing for this plan, and (2) the physical development of skateboarding sites.



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### *Strategic plan*

The outcome of the skaters' plan was a tiered skateboarding system which would entail locating 'microsites', small skateboarding spots, all over the city; a much smaller number of intermediate skateparks dispersed throughout the city; and a single advanced-level skatepark (Pletsch 2005: 37). This approach was included in Metro Parks' strategic plan, which also called for linking the array of small skate sites, where possible, by 'Skate Routes' corresponding to bicycle and/or transit routes. To implement this plan, the 2005 Park Bond Program included a U.S.\$750,000 allocation for the development of skateparks, to 'provide facilities throughout the community'. Following the successful approval of this bond, skateboarders worked with various park planners to create recreational park designs.

### *Sites*

The first microsite was completed in the beginning of 2006 and involved the removal of skate stoppers on a popular ledge in a historic park along the Thea Foss Waterway and the addition of a manual pad, a common element in skateparks. The Thea Foss Waterway is an area undergoing drastic post-industrial redevelopment and the City is hoping it will entice and encourage outside investment. It will become a two-mile promenade and skate elements and skate-friendly spots are being incorporated throughout the entire project.

The adopted Metro Parks' Strategic Plans and its Design Guidelines supported the development of skate facilities in community and regional parks throughout the District. The funding plan allocated funding for skate facility improvements in a new community park to be created in conjunction with the development of a new community centre, and in six other community parks/sports complexes.

### **Agents involved**

Three types of partners are involved in the implementation of this policy:

- *Area skateboarders* provide the aggregate communication for the Skatepark Program. Other stakeholders deliver specific elements of support and seek to coordinate bubble elements of the larger program.
- *The City of Tacoma* and *Metro Parks Tacoma* (separate entities) help coordinate the planning logistics of capital improvements. The City provides additional support in negotiating the access and procurement of properties most appropriate for skateboarding activity.
- *Peer organizations*, such as Skaters for Public Skateparks, also provide auxiliary support by building community awareness for skateboarding and presenting ancillary skateboarding messages that cast positive light on the (often controversial) activity.

### **Beneficiaries**

The policy was primarily aimed to benefit skateboarding youth, both male and female, who are empowered through the program and gain safe and well-designed skate parts in which to recreate. The program also benefited area residents; the general public of Tacoma; the local business community who participated in finding a solution to a conflict over public space use by skateboarders in the downtown core; and the City of Tacoma, who found optimal approaches to meeting the needs of its residents and empowering its youth citizens in this situation.



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More generally, beyond the skateboarding youth themselves, beneficiaries of skatepark development include:

- Local residents, those people who reside in the immediate vicinity of the skateboarding area, who benefit from having regular, healthy athletic activity occurring near their homes. This activity involves and invites people who, through passive policing, displace unwanted activity from the area.
- The general public, which enjoys safer environments for their recreating youth. Over time, people come to understand and appreciate the skateboarding activity as a known and expected activity. When that understanding is broad, skateboarding areas in cities often become attractive places for the broad community to gather.
- City governments, which benefit from skateparks by enjoying the public goodwill of having supported these popular and efficient facilities. With so much of politics being public, popular decisions are often emphasized and used as indications of responsive representation. Successful skateparks often become hallmarks of a government's support for youth activity.
- Business owners and the districts in which they congregate benefit from the creation of sanctioned skateboarding areas. Skateparks usually feature structures that mimic (and improve upon) institutional architecture, architecture that typically was designed to invite the (non-skateboarding) public into a business establishment. When new skateparks are built, the skateboarders are attracted to the sanctioned facility and drawn away from those areas where skating is inappropriate. The reduction of nuisance activity promotes commercial activity.

### Participation processes implemented

Beginning with regular face-to-face meetings to enable dialogue between local skateboarders, city officials, and anti-skateboarding stakeholders and to facilitate the development of solutions to the initially oppositional situation, the process led to the local skateboarding taking the lead to create a plan to locate and design places for skateboarding. Skatepark creation involves a complex process that affords – and benefits from – the involvement of the skateboarding community at every stage. The end result is an empowered youth and powerful participation in community matters.

### Institutionalization processes

The policy was institutionalized through its inclusion in the Metro Parks strategic plan (2007) and financing through the 2005 Park Bond Program.

It has been operationalized through the collaborative design (i.e., parks planners working with the local skateboarding community) and the physical construction of skateboard parks in the city.

### Financing

The Skatepark Program relies heavily on volunteerism and community donations to meet its meager financial needs, and receives community and neighbourhood grants as well as private funding (predominately in the form of services). The physical development of skateparks is primarily financed through the 2005 Park Bond Program, which includes a \$750,000 allocation



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for skate parks, with the possibility of outside donations or other contributions.<sup>2</sup> Some skateparks are part of broader project initiatives in which other sources of financing are also involved. Table 1 outlines the details of the financing of the three strategic initiatives for skateparks within the Park Bond funding envelope.

**Table 1. Proposed Funding Allocations**

Site/Project	Improvement	Intent	Approx. Implementation Date	Proposed Funding
South Tacoma Skate Park	MPT match for a destination skate park feature.	Bond funds would be a MPT match in a larger project initiative. This would be done as part of the proposed new South Tacoma Community Centre/new community park/SEA complex.	2010	\$300,000
Supplemental skate park funding for McKinley Park	Provide supplemental funds for integrated skate park features in this near term park project.	McKinley Park is currently in design, has strong neighborhood support for integrated skate park features, and is in need of supplemental funding.	2007	\$75,000
Supplemental skate park funding to improve existing major skate parks	Provide supplemental/matching funds to renovate or expand existing skate parks.	Candidate sites are Stewart Heights (2008) Norpoint (2009), & Heidelberg (2010).	2008-2012	\$125,000/site = \$375,000
<b>Total funding</b>				<b>\$750,000</b>

Source: Metro Parks Tacoma (2007)

### Key results and achievements

*Achievements.* The development of new and renewed skateboard spaces is underway.<sup>3</sup> The complex process of skatepark creation involved the skateboarding community at every stage, resulting in empowered youth and powerful youth participation in community matters. Civic involvement by youth is ordinarily difficult. Participants in the grassroots skatepark advocacy enjoyed a newfound confidence in their ability to make change and be heard by their community. Full community acceptance of skateboarding youth is an ongoing challenge.

### Main obstacles

Skateboarding culture is often shrouded by a cloud of mistrust and misconceptions. Skaters are sometimes seen as miscreants, vandals, and trouble-makers. As a result, it is not uncommon for homeowners nearby a proposed skatepark site to be resistant to the vision shared by skatepark advocates. Those detractors to the skatepark project anticipate great problems with the eventual users which, it is feared, leads to an unsafe, unattractive environment and a depreciation of property values. The Parks Department has sometimes been reluctant to fully endorse an appropriate site due to local neighborhood resistance to the project. Due to this social resistance, identifying the best physical locations for skateboarding that will be accepted by the local community is the largest obstacle.

<sup>2</sup> Metro Parks anticipated \$150,000 in donations/contributions to be committed to projects at the rate of \$50,000 per year for 2009, 2010, and 2011, but at the time of writing no active program had been put in place by Metro Parks to solicit funds and/or in-kind donations.

<sup>3</sup> Metro Parks' status report on the 2005 Bond projects (at September 2010) reports that the McKinley Park skatepark is completed and the Norpoint Park skatepark is in process.





## **Replicability or adaptation of policy elsewhere**

*Main pre-requisites for a similar intervention:*

- A need must exist for skateboarding facilities. The best way to measure this need is to identify where local youth are currently skateboarding. If that activity is occurring primarily in spaces where it is a nuisance, causing property damage, or displacing other intentional activity, a skatepark (or additional skateparks) may be necessary.
- A passionate core of local youth skatepark advocates is essential for catalyzing the larger local skateboarding community and acting as the informational nexus for grassroots civic activation.
- Relative to other created public spaces, skateparks are inexpensive to create and maintain. Most properly designed and built skateparks require little more than light routine maintenance (regular trash removal and annual cosmetic refurbishments). Skateparks easily surpass sports fields in economic terms when maintenance costs are considered on a 'per user' basis as skateparks are frequently used all day, every day. Nonetheless, skateparks require a small initial investment. Many nationally known skateparks have been created for less than U.S.\$150,000 and smaller skate spots have been reported to cost as little as \$3,000 yet they fully meet the local need.

*Recommendations to cities that want to formulate and implement social inclusion policies:*

- Incubating the initial grassroots community of skateboarders may prove to be difficult at first. Diligent communities will be richly rewarded from supporting those groups that demonstrate initiative by approaching City agencies. It's vitally important that cities recognize and promote this dialog between the bureaucratic entities and the (often) disenfranchised youth.
- These opportunities may be infrequent and every attempt should be made to capitalize on the opportunity.
- Determining how much terrain and where that terrain should occur within the target area may seem daunting at first. Thankfully, there are several emerging resources for city-wide skatepark planning online.
- Lastly, but no less vital, communities must be prepared to create a sustainable skateboarding space. Seemingly subtle or inconsequential compromise in terrain design and construction can quickly lead to a failed environment. Again, not-for-profit resources exist online to assist in this decision-making.





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## **SUMMARY**

The Metro Parks Tacoma 'Program to Empower Marginalized Youth through Community Action and Inclusion' ('Skatepark Program') plans and develops a network of public spaces designed for skateboarding, in a close collaborative planning process between the skateboarding community and Metro Parks. Through the program, the City aims to empower skateboarding youth in the community and instill greater appreciation and support for skateboarders within the broader community.

The program arose out of a conflict between the young skateboarders and local businesses in the revitalized downtown area in 2002. Municipal public policy had been initiated to exclude and ban skateboarders from this activity in the city. Beginning with regular face-to-face meetings to enable dialogue between local skateboards, city officials, and anti-skateboarding stakeholders and to facilitate the development of solutions to the initially oppositional situation, the process led to the local skateboarding community taking the lead to create a plan, select sites, and co-design places for skateboarders.

The outcome of the skaters' plan was a tiered skateboarding system which would entail locating 'microsites', small skateboarding spots, all over the city; a much smaller number of intermediate skateparks dispersed throughout the city; and a single advanced-level skatepark. The plan was included in the strategic plan for Metro Parks, and in 2005, the Park Bond Program included a \$750,000 allocation for intermediate skateparks to be developed around the city. The first microsite was completed at the beginning of 2006.

The implementation of the policy involves area skateboarders, the City of Tacoma and Metro Parks Tacoma, and peer organizations such as Skaters for Public Skateparks, a national NGO. Skatepark creation involves a complex process that affords – and benefits from – the involvement of the skateboarding community at every stage. The end result is an empowered youth and powerful participation in community matters.

The policy was primarily aimed to benefit skateboarding youth, both male and female, who are empowered through the program and gain safe and well-designed skate parts in which to recreate. The program also benefited area residents; the general public of Tacoma; the local business community who participated in finding a solution to a conflict over public space use by skateboarders in the downtown core; and the City of Tacoma, who found optimal approaches to meeting the needs of its residents and empowering its youth citizens in this situation.

In addition to grassroots involvement in passing the Parks Bond financing measure, the Skatepark Program relies heavily on volunteerism and community donations to meet its meager financial needs, and receives community and neighbourhood grants and some private funding (predominately in the form of services). The physical development of skateparks is primarily financed through the 2005 Park Bond Program, which includes a \$750,000 allocation for skate parks, with some possibility of outside donations or other contributions. Some skateparks are part of broader project initiatives in which other sources of financing are also involved.



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The metrics for program success are threefold: (1) the development of sanctioned built environments for skateboarding youth (e.g., skateparks and skate spaces) that are open for public use and fully meet the public need; (2) community acceptance and eventual adoption of this inclusive youth activity; and (3) a heightened grassroots involvement by previously marginalized youth. One of the largest obstacles encountered has been social resistance of local communities to the location of a skatepark in their neighbourhood. Thus, it has been challenging to identify the best physical locations for skateboarding that will be accepted by the local community.

The case narrative includes pre-requisites and recommendations for cities that want to implement a similar intervention for skateboarding.

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Metro Parks Tacoma: <http://www.metroparkstacoma.org/>

Skaters for Public Skateparks: <http://www.skatersforpublicskateparks.org/> (search 'Tacoma')

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### Acknowledgements / Credits

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All narratives compiled in 2007 including this one were revised by a DPU editorial committee composed of Ernesto Jose Lopez Morales, Sonia Roitman, Michelle Pletsch, Steffen Lajoie, Luisa Dornelas, Iyad Issa and Pechladda Pechpakdee.

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