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Drive starts to renovate kids' park

By RAY WEISS, Staff writer 

ORMOND BEACH -- It's no longer so sweet at 16.

But support is growing among city residents and city government to renovate the most popular children's park in Ormond Beach -- Magic Forest Playground, better known as Rainbow Park.

A fund drive for a facelift is under way, and the city has agreed to match up to \$40,000 in contributions for renovations and upgrades that could begin as early as next fall.

"It's exciting. I think it's picking up speed and will continue to gain momentum once we come up with an action plan and people know exactly what will happen," said Bill Partington, the city commissioner who first recommended giving the playground a facelift. "The commission recently earmarked \$40,000 during a workshop."

Ormond Beach officials say at least 100 people a day visit Rainbow Park, even more on weekends.

Parents can be seen sitting on wooden benches, carrying on conversations, often with strangers, as their kids race across the sawdust-covered ground, bouncing between things to climb and places to conquer.

During the school year, buses and vans from day-care centers and private preschools are a common sight at the playground across from the Trails Shopping Center.

Diane Ledford was the force behind Rainbow Park in 1992. She had grown tired of the traditional broken and rusted playground equipment her 2-year-old daughter played with at the time. Ledford recruited a few other mothers at first and the effort mushroomed.

Two years later, backed by \$160,000 in community donations and 2,000 volunteers, a new playground was up and ready in six days.

But the wood has faded, a few beams are loose and the equipment creaks with age. In park years, 16 is old. The unrelenting Florida heat, humidity and rain haven't been kind.

Ledford has agreed to help lead the renovation effort of "her baby."

And so has Mike Bowen, a 45-year-old construction project manager and father of two young fans of the oak-shaded playground. He recently contacted Partington and volunteered to help find money and volunteers to refurbish and possibly remodel Rainbow Park.

Bowen said anyone interested in helping can attend a meeting set for Thursday at 3 p.m. at the Ormond Beach Performing Arts Center on U.S. 1. He said a sign soon will go up at the playground seeking volunteers -- people whose children or grandchildren frequent the park.

"There's a need to redo the park. Maybe we can add a water spot," he said. "I was just out there Friday evening and talked to people. Everyone's for it, of course."

Bowen said the goal is to raise between \$100,000 and \$120,000 by October. But he said people, especially those with small children, need to step up.

"It needs to be a community project," he said.

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