

**Belfast City Park Improvements for Children and Families to Enjoy
While Social Distancing**

Prepared for:

Mayor and City Council Members; Parks and Recreation Department; Our
Town Belfast Community Organization; Belfast Residents
Belfast, Maine

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Image 1: [Belfast, ME - Official Website | Official Website \(cityofbelfast.org\)](http://Belfast, ME - Official Website | Official Website (cityofbelfast.org))

May 1, 2021

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Belfast City Council
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Dear City Council Members,

Subject: Belfast City Park Improvements for Children and Families to Enjoy While Social Distancing

Belfast City Park, at 17.5 acres, is the largest park in the City of Belfast. This park has one playground area for children to use. Due to the Covid-19 restraints, one playground prevents multiple families with children to gather and play while adhering to the social distancing guidelines. There is also only one covered pavilion which sits next to the ocean and shoreline. This poses an issue when many families wish to enter the Belfast City Park to have picnics, small gatherings for family events, or just to admire the Belfast Bay. Also in place is one stairway of stone leading to the shoreline.

The addition of multiple covered spaces, or gazebo type areas, would allow multiple, small families to gather and not inhibit Covid-19 guidelines for avoiding crowds. Incorporating two more playground areas would allow children to seek the recreational enjoyment they desire and need without impeding the guidelines for social distancing. An additional set of stairs that leads to the shoreline would allow people to move up or down without overcrowding.

Belfast City Park boasts several large, open lawn areas that could be used for erecting multiple gazebo-type spaces as well as the addition of two playground areas. A project of this size could be completed in minimal time with proper planning; just in time for summer and the arrival of tourists. With many varying and potentially-qualified carpenters, landscapers, and contractors in Belfast, we could incorporate a 'donate your time and experience' principle to accomplish the needs of developing and building this proposal while limiting excessive budget expenditures.

Thank you for your consideration and time.

Sincerely yours,

Angela Waterman

Angela Waterman

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ABSTRACT

The Belfast City Park contains several large and open lawn areas that could be used for additional gazebos and playgrounds. During the summer, the City of Belfast has many families that are looking for outdoor recreation. Parks generally see an increase of visitations by local residents and out-of-town visitors.

With Covid-19 restrictions, Belfast City Park has several areas within its limits that are not designed for social distancing and the guidelines imposed. The park requires additional covered spaces for small gatherings and more play options for children by building another playground area.

Also found at the park is a stone-built staircase that leads to the ocean shoreline as well an unsafe pathway behind the pavilion. This poses a problem with many people using the stairs as the only safe means to gain access to and explore the beach area and shoreline. More than one safe entry to access the beach area needs to be considered.

INTRODUCTION

Because of the global pandemic due to Covid-19 and the social restrictions in place, Belfast City Park is not currently designed to allow families, children, and all people to visit the park and enjoy all of its features safely.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

At present, Belfast City Park has 17.5 acres for people to enjoy. In figure 1, it is seen that this park is quite large. Within the park, many amenities for families and visitors are offered.



Figure 1: Map of Belfast City Park, [88 NORTHPORT AVE - City of Belfast, ME - MapGeo](#)

As visitors arrive at the entrance of an old-fashioned wrought iron fence, the beauty greets them. The park offers a one-way gravel road that winds through. Next is a well-kept baseball field that area youth programs use and families practice various ball games. When visitors drive through the park, a large swimming pool is seen on the far right that has certainly seen better days.

Nearby the pool lies the playground area (see image 3 on page 4). Belfast City Park has one playground area for children to play, with many features built in, such as a long slide, an arrangement of swings, a discovery tunnel, and a large climbing obstacle. Also found in the play area is a sandpit with digging tools. Most of this playground is geared for slightly older children, with minimal focus toward younger children under the age of seven.

At the bottom of the hill, a large pavilion with several picnic tables sits atop the shoreline (see image 2 on page 2). People hold gatherings in the pavilion, such as birthday and anniversary parties with family and friends. Off to the right of the pavilion offers a gravel parking lot. A stone staircase is available for access to the beach and shoreline. Several granite benches are available for people to sit and watch explorers search for treasures and to watch the boats sail by. Nearby the parking lot are several horseshoe pits that are rarely used. Not including the

restrooms at the pool, Belfast City Park holds two restrooms, one for males and one for females, located in the concrete building that sits midway on the hill before the parking lot entrance.

On warm and sunny days, many families visit the park with their children. Families walk and explore the beach for tiny treasures. They hike along the stream through the woods. Children explore the many features of the playground while parents take a moment to relax on a park bench. Moms and dads are seen playing ball with their children or running around to exert extra energy in the large grassy areas.



Image 2: The Pavilion at Belfast City Park, Image courtesy of Rebecca Bunker, September 2020

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many features of Belfast City Park cannot be enjoyed by all due to the social distancing guidelines. With so many people, more features need to be added to



Figure 2.1: Public Awareness for Covid-19 and the CDC's Suggested Guidelines

prevent overcrowding within certain areas of the park. According to the CDC and the Covid-19 guidelines, "people should maintain a six-foot distance from others not within their group both indoors as well as outdoors." (see figure 2.1)

The CDC says it is safer for outdoor activity than indoor activity. The CDC also recommends maintaining six feet of distance between people who are not in their household; when the six-foot distance cannot be maintained it is suggested to put on a cloth face mask. The CDC mentions various park activities that include having a barbeque or a picnic for socializing with people not in their household. Children can play kickball to maintain social distancing.

Covid-19 has caused many active people to change their routines because of limited abilities for indoor activities. Research in a Canadian study by Lesser, Iris A, and Carl P Nienhuis has shown that people have faced less physical activity with the closures of many public places that included parks and gyms. However, due to many closures and self-isolation, Covid-19 restrictions have caused more adults to become more active with outdoor activities. Many people found outdoor activity to be most valuable as seen in figure 2.2. The individuals who were generally inactive before Covid-19, but became more active in their physical activities during Covid-19 were found to have lower anxiety, a better well-being both physically and mentally over those who were normally active before

Outdoor physical activity behaviour.

Participant Characteristics	Inactive N (%)	Active N (%)	p-Value
	696 (63.4)	402 (36.6)	
Physical Activity Location			
Indoors	57 (8.2)	21 (5.2)	
Outdoors	286 (41.1)	91 (22.6)	<0.001
Both	350 (50.3)	289 (71.9)	
Natural environment			
Yes	526 (75.6)	332 (82.6)	
No	136 (19.5)	62 (15.4)	0.053
How essential is nature?			
Very important	420 (60)	263 (65.4)	
Somewhat important	189 (27.2)	94 (23.4)	0.359
Not important	81 (11.7)	44 (10.9)	

Figure 2.2: Covid-19 Effects of Active Vs. Inactive People: A Canadian Study

the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was also found that the inactive adults found it more beneficial to participate in physical activities when they had someone to be active with.

A study conducted in the UK by Shoari, Niloofar, et al. also found similar results as Canada did, noting that closing parks would have an adverse effect on the mental and physical well-being of the population. This study states that being over-cautious in one location could cause overcrowding at other locations; this particular occurrence was experienced in Paris, France. They also found that several large cities in the United States and in the UK had closed down city streets to encourage more safe physical activity such as running and walking as well as allowing children to have additional, automobile-free play areas.

In “The Science Of Play” on pages five and six, Solomon mentions how businesses are deploying marketing plans to incorporate play areas to draw attention, which shows that the interest of variety is there for children. Solomon talks about landscapers designing play gardens and playscapes. Designers of playgrounds are finding children desire play areas that encourage challenge and discovery .

At Belfast City Park, multiple people from different groups would be discouraged in the use of the pavilion at one time due to the social distancing guidelines. Although this one covered space has the potential to easily accommodate up to fifty people, due to social distancing, it should house a quarter of that number. With a small addition to the center of the pavilion, erecting a simple wall could create two spaces inside the one structure to allow two separate, small groups. However, the addition of three covered spaces, or gazebo-type structures, should be built in varying locations of Belfast City Park. Due to the large and open, spread-out areas within the park, an

opportunity is present for these additions. Because it is in human nature to gather, the city of Belfast needs to explore this option as a beneficial endeavor to accomplish for all people.



Image 3: View overlooking the playground in Belfast City Park
Courtesy of Sohbet Artists September 2016

The importance of playgrounds for children is not only to play, but it is for them to learn. Children develop certain learning skills from playground play. While it is play time to them, they are actually learning social norms while playing and interacting with other children. The use of playground equipment allows them to test their limitations. However, only one playground exists for children in Belfast City Park (see image 3). Because of social distancing of six-feet, many children cannot gather at just one playground and adhere to guidelines. According to The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), it is a fundamental right of all children to play. The importance of additional playground availability needs to be recognized at Belfast City Park.

Boston University journalism professor, Ellen R. Shell of the article “Kids Don't Need Equipment, They Need Opportunity” explains in great detail how the creative minds of children are not reliant on only playground equipment but also open spaces for creation. Also in this article by Shell, Joe Frost, the designer of the Beauvoir School playground in Washington, DC says, “it's more important than ever to provide them [*children*] with a rich and creative play environment.” Not only do children need a playground to conquer, to help build their self-esteem, they also need play spaces to get creative and explore. This concept is partially found at the one playground in Belfast City Park. It is mostly catered to middle-aged children who are between six and twelve, although the large, sandy play area is adept for smaller children.

While some families have multiple children, sometimes the age gap between the children can span several years. In Belfast City Park’s playground area, it lacks variety for the younger child to play with. There is an open space below the existing playground area that could accommodate an additional piece of equipment geared for children under seven years of age. This could potentially allow parents with multiple children the opportunity to watch over their children in one specific area. Playgrounds are generally what children gravitate towards, especially with the mention of visiting any park. Multiple play areas allows accommodation to many families. Parks are for all ages, and Belfast City Park truly caters to many ages, young and old alike.



Image 4: The Vortex: Gametime playground system

Because Gametime playground systems are federally and internationally certified, it would

be a great investment to Belfast City Park. Gametime provides hundreds of options for playground systems that are used worldwide. Their expertise with playgrounds for parks and schools is immeasurable. Gametime also provides resources for seeking funding from organizations that help with the donation of monetary funds toward building and updating playgrounds. As seen in image 4, this is the Vortex play system featured by Gametime. It sells for under \$50,000 and would cater more so to young children up to age five. Nearby would be a large, dirt area containing an old tree stump enticing children to create, build, dig, and to explore. Envision this play system in earthy tones in the park area, children laughing and playing, and park benches surrounding it with parents looking on. Belfast City Park promotes a gathering of family fun and everyone enjoying the nearby smells of the ocean.

Belfast City Park is more than just a sightseeing area for visitors. People enjoy the park for various recreational sports. Tennis courts, a basketball court, a baseball field, and a swimming pool can all be found at Belfast City Park as well. While serving so many different people and with varying interests, it seems the park should cater to area families and children even more than it currently does. Many year-round residents look for family-friendly parks for their outdoor activities and recreation. The city of Belfast should recognize this need for its local, residential families as well as out-of-town visitors.



Image 5: Belfast City Park Entrance
[Belfast, ME - Official Website \(cityofbelfast.org\)](http://cityofbelfast.org)

MODE OF ANALYSIS

The online University of Maine at Augusta (UMA) library database was used for the majority of research. Many articles about the importance of outdoor activities for children and adults were available. Park areas are not only for exercise, but socializing, playing, and gathering is of major importance, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many valuable journals and articles were found in the library database at UMA. It really is impressive with how many people have dedicated many years into research for the perfect playground options for children. The discoveries they have made regarding children's desire for exploration and creativity while playing surpasses just a basic need for play equipment. The involvement of learning while playing is of greatest value.

The discovery of Gametime playground systems and their expertise of playground equipment from their website has provided a lot of knowledge availability. They have many options of playground systems to choose from in a variety of cost ranges. Gametime's website also provides valuable resources on seeking donations for organizations who are building or expanding playgrounds. Their realization of playground importance expresses a real understanding of the needs for supporting their community and children.

The City of Belfast organization's website also provided useful information. The ability to have exact park information in regards to size, outline, landscape, and mapping of roads and paths provided detailed information. Google maps provided a detailed, true visual aerial representation of Belfast City Park with its satellite viewing option.

The CDC government website provided the regulations and guidelines for social distancing. The CDC included suggestions of indoor and outdoor activities to maintain safety from the Covid-19 virus. When people leave their home, there are safe practices to follow and can be found on the CDC website which includes social distancing and when to wear a mask.

CONCLUSIONS

Belfast City Park needs to evolve to meet the community needs of families with children and all persons due to social distancing guidelines resulting directly from Covid-19. Human nature is to gather, play, explore, and be active. Expansion of the park is detrimental for the safety and well-being for all the visitors of Belfast City Park.

With the lifting of some Covid-19 restrictions, it has allowed public places to reopen, while adhering to social distancing guidelines and the wearing of cloth face masks in public, people are visiting parks and gyms once again. Due to this, the city of Belfast should look strongly into expanding Belfast City Park to accommodate all the individuals who would have the desire to visit the park for recreational activities. With an additional playground many more families will be encouraged to seek outdoor activities in the park. Outdoor play and exploration encourages children to learn while having fun.

With the addition of covered gathering places, such as small gazebo-type structures, people will utilize them for social gathering and allow for exploration of the many features found at Belfast City Park. These gathering places would be spread out to allow acceptable distancing from people not within their group.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In figure 3, an aerial view of Belfast City Park is seen, which has a few possible locations indicated for the additions I have recommended. With Gametime playground systems, one unit called The Vortex, measures in at only 37 feet by 38 feet and can be purchased for under \$50,000. This will provide an additional playground for many children, especially in the under



Figure 3: Google Satellite Image - Belfast City Park

seven age range.

With a couple of landscapers, they can create a play area consisting of dirt, an old tree stump, and rocks to make the perfect exploration space for inquisitive children to learn and discover. Several park benches should be nestled nearby allowing parents to oversee their children playing.

Belfast area carpenters and contractors could provide their expertise and skills to build several gazebo-type covered buildings that are open for picnics or barbeque gathering and allow people to socialize safely outdoors.

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