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Desmond Drake, 10, of Greenfield, plays catch at the Green River Swimming and Recreation Area.

GREENFIELD

'Positive spaces for kids'

Amid pandemic, adults seek to further activities for teens, preteens

By ANITA FRITZ
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GREENFIELD — Some adults say the pandemic has only amplified their beliefs that the city must do more for its teens and preteens.

For more than a decade, Greenfield has talked about bringing back a skate park that was dismantled when developer Mark Zacchio bought the Olive Street property to build apartments. Zacchio was one of many people who worked to find a new home for the park, but without success.

Since then, the city has considered town-owned properties and is still doing so. The Greenfield Recreation Department, Greening Greenfield, Skate Greenfield and numerous individuals have discussed possibilities over the years.

Francesca Passiglia's son is a skateboarder, so her family has paid close attention and been part of discussions. Her son currently goes to the skate park in Turners Falls.

"We'll see it through to a new skate

park in Greenfield," Passiglia said. "We want positive spaces for kids. Some kids are anxious about remote learning this fall. They need something."

In the meantime, Passiglia, assistant head of Borrower Services at Greenfield Public Library, said there are things families can do to keep their teens busy and happy during the pandemic, and the library is offering programs to help.

"My kids, for instance, spend time with their friends outside while social distancing, whether riding their bikes or hiking," she said. "We've got to have places, things for kids to do, de-stress."

The library is offering children ages 12 to 18 a summer reading program she plans to extend into fall.

"The goal is to get them offline for some time each day," she said. "They pick up their kits curbside, so there doesn't have to be any contact."

Passiglia said each child takes a personality quiz created by the library based on BuzzFeed-type quizzes, asking questions like the types of books they read, how

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FRANCESCA PASSIGLIA

they spend their time, what television shows and movies they watch, where they would travel if they could and more.

"We take the information and pick a book," Passiglia said. "The program has been incredibly successful. We're seeing kids that have never been to the library before."

When a child picks up a kit, he or she receives the book chosen for them, a book review form, a sketchbook and prompts, a stress ball, candy, herbal tea and other small gifts. They can read as many books as they'd like.

Passiglia said numerous subcommittees have been created as the city moves

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STAFF PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ

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Activities

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ahead with building its new library, and one is the Teen Space Building Committee, which is discussing with 31 teens what they want in their room in the new library.

"They've met with these teens six times," she said. "Those kids have created a survey that they've distributed to their classmates and friends. Some of the results have been presented to the architects."

Those teens have also said they'd like to see a place where they can play pool, ping-pong or foosball and one like Hawks & Reed Performing Arts Center but for teens.

"They've asked the adults on the committee to set up a meeting with the mayor so they can share their ideas, concerns and comments with her," she said. "Some of them have heard about the arcade that used to be located in the Rooney's building. They want things like that, the skate park and other venues to return to Greenfield."

Susan Worgaftik said she has been working with an ad hoc group of people for six or seven years who want to see a skate park built in Greenfield.

"Nothing is firm yet," Worgaftik said. "We've been working with the Recreation Department, hoping to apply for some funds to build one. We're looking at different properties and have one in mind, but still have to further discuss things with the

mayor."

Worgaftik said if everything were to fall into place and funding could be secured by next summer, a skate park could possibly be built and open by fiscal year 2023, which begins July 1, 2022.

"There are still a lot of 'ifs,'" she said. "The only hold-up we have is the funding and site. We want to see this get done for our youths."

Greenfield Recreation Department Assistant Director Kelly Jenkins said there are many ideas and programs "in the works," but the department isn't going to announce them until all of the details have been worked out. In the meantime, older children can go to any of the city's parks and play pickup games of basketball or other sports. She said there are no organized sports happening at this time.

"We're focusing mostly on middle-schoolers," she said.

Jenkins mentioned a new virtual program called "24 Hours in Atlantis." Middle-schoolers meet on Zoom and are sent on a quest around and inside their homes.

"We'll be challenging them to get up and move around to find things," she said. "If this one goes well, we'll build off of it and have different themes each time."

The department will also modify some of its regular programs for youths, including its Halloween program, though details are not yet available.

"We were in the process of opening a drop-in teen center when the pandemic hit, so

that probably won't happen for a while," she said.

Greenfield's former teen center closed its doors in 2009 and since then, city officials have heard from people who want to see it restored. Jenkins said a teen center could provide homework help, games, air hockey and foosball, all for middle-schoolers.

Jenkins said she and Recreation Department Director Christy Moore think it's important for children to connect with each other, as long as they do it safely during the pandemic.

"They need positive relationships," she said. "They need positive activities, outlets to participate in while socially distancing. They need to connect with each other and the community as a whole."

The Green River Swimming and Recreation Area is one place children can go not only to cool off, but to socialize and exercise. It is open seven days a week from noon to 7 p.m. through Aug. 30, will be closed Aug. 31 through Sept. 4, and then will be open Labor Day weekend, Sept. 5, 6 and 7, for the last time this year.

"We're doing our best to promote social distancing there," Jenkins said. "We keep a close watch on the beach and area, and when it approaches a place where there are too many people to keep enough space between them, we close the area down to new entries, allowing them in when others leave."

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