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Park would bring kids, disabled peers together

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Swings, sandboxes and slides should be made for kids who can't walk as much as for those who can, according to a group dedicated to building a fully accessible playground in St. Cloud.

Kaleidoscope, a new playground planned for Wilson Park on the city's East Side, would be at least 95 percent accessible to kids and adults of differing abilities, said Rona Karasik, a St. Cloud State University professor of community studies.

Karasik and four semesters' worth of students in her community and democratic citizenship course have guided the park's development from a vision to a design that only needs funding to become a reality.

Though it would be the first of its kind in the region, the aim of Kaleidoscope is not to build a park for children with disabilities, Karasik said.

"It's a playground for everybody," she said. "If kids of differing abilities play together and become comfortable, they don't see the differences between them as much."

The ambitious project is under way, with preparation of the future site near the Wilson Park shelter close to complete, said Prentiss Foster, assistant park director.

When completed, the park would have all the amenities of a regular playground, but they would all be accessible to

children with disabilities, either through elevation to wheelchair height, easy wheelchair entry or transfer spots for kids to climb onto equipment, he said.

The most expensive part of the playground's estimated \$320,000 cost, though, will be surfacing the playground in poured rubber to make it safe and easy for all to navigate.

No city funds are planned for use, though the park may be eligible for funding from a local half-cent sales tax, Foster said.

A state park and trails grant that would cover about \$150,000 of the cost is essential to the park's completion, but even if state budget cuts eliminate the grant the park can be built a piece at a time if supporters can raise enough funds privately, said St. Cloud State student Talia Wiscmann.

"We understand there is a budget deficit and there are cuts being made. We know we're looking at a huge chunk of money," she said. "But we believe it's worth it for our children's future."

Students, the St. Cloud East Side Boosters, the city Parks Department and Central Minnesota Community Foundation are working on fund-raising, Karasik said.

To get involved

Contributions can be sent to "The Kaleidoscope Fund, Central Minnesota Community Foundation Inc., 101 Seventh Ave. S., Suite 200, St. Cloud, MN 56302-1284. The foundation is a non-profit organization with 501c3 status.