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Locals share ideas for new Jennings Creek park

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Aldin Dedic (right), 15, sketches his dream playground for the Creekwood between the Creekwood neighborhood and Jennings Creek Elementary Halid, 5, and Sedin, 15, during the Down at the Creek community celebration. Locals share what they want from the project.

PHOTOS BY Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

Aldin Dedic's dream park includes a volleyball court, a zip line and a rope bridge with a creekside view.

The 15-year-old was one of several kids to share their vision for the city of Bowling Green's Jennings Creek park, a collaborative project that was officially dedicated with a community celebration Saturday morning.

Dozens of neighbors, city officials and excited youngsters traveled down to the creek to share their visions for the space behind Jennings Creek Elementary and catch a glimpse of the work still to come on a plot of land once left tattered by the city's December 2021 tornadoes.

"I can walk here and play," Dedic said, excited about the development coming to fruition near his family's home.

The idea for the park was hatched in spring of 2021, a scheme shared between Bowling Green Parks and Recreation's Special Populations Coordinator Cameron Levis and Metropolitan Planning Organization Coordinator Karissa Lemon.

Levis said the proposition "sat on desks" for a while. Things changed when a deadly EF3 tornado struck the area that December, shifting the vision toward creating a space of refuge for residents affected by the disaster.

Out of the 17 deaths attributed to the tragedy, 12 lives were lost along Moss Creek Avenue – directly adjacent to the land the pair had been looking at.

“This project then kind of had a fire lit under it,” Levis said. “There was more of a motivation to want to get down here and provide something for our community that was positive.”

Support came pouring in.

Bowling Green’s Rotary clubs each chipped in \$20,000 toward the project. Scotty’s Contracting and Stone installed a pathway and a creek access point at no charge.

Just last week, United Way of Southern Kentucky made a donation of nearly \$350,000 to the park in order to construct the first natural playground of its kind around Bowling Green.

Tracey Hunt, a representative from the Noon Rotary, said that their funding hasn’t been spent yet because so many community partners stepped forward to donate labor and resources.

“It will be spent, but I think this project is going to end up being a \$1 million project,” Hunt said. “There’s no amount of vision here that’s not going to go unreached.”

Dr. Jason Polk, director of Western Kentucky University’s Center for Human GeoEnvironmental Studies (CHNGES), was among the first to arrive in the area following the storm on Dec. 11.

CHNGES was allotted twin \$10,000 grants from the A.M. Rotary to install educational signage, a 3D stream model and a real-time water quality monitoring station at the park.

“Couldn’t be happier to at least have this moment to give back something,” Polk said. “To try to build resilience and educate this community that sacrificed so much.”

Aldin’s mother, Edina Dedic, said the family has lived nearby for eight years, their home taking damage from that winter’s storm.

She said her three boys usually play at Preston Miller Park, but she said Jennings Creek will definitely become the family’s top outdoor spot as it continues to take shape.

Aldin and other young architects were encouraged to plot out their preferred playground fixtures, drawing up their ideal parks with colorful markers.

Swing sets and slides were common requests. Other kids let their imaginations run wild, drawing up elaborate water fixtures.

“You can make it anything that you want,” Matt Powell, Bowling Green’s environmental manager, said to a group of visitors. “Don’t box yourself into a rectangle and cram everything into a box. Use the space.”

The park's outdoor classroom, a series of logs and boulders arranged for seating, has already seen some use. While Levis told the tale of how the park came to be, excited kids scrambled from stump to stump behind his podium.

“(This park) is a tribute to the strength of this community, all of the people that are involved in this; it is truly remarkable to see how strong our community is,” Levis said. “I think we all learned that in light of the tornadoes and it continues almost two years later.”