



**CONCLUDED
PROBLEM REPORT
PS-1**

Problem ID : 52

Reporting Division :NORTH

District:

Neighbourhood:

Address:

Reg	Rank	Last Name	First Name
1605	CST	COOPER	R
989	SGT	KRACHER	R

Key Description : YOUTHS DAMAGE PARK

Problem Description:

The following is an example of community problem solving. It is an example where the police played a role, but not so much a leading role. Rather, the police lent their support and expertise to an initiative already undertaken by a group of concerned mothers and area residents.

Although the police came to play a role in resolving this community concern, ironically it had never occurred to the original organizers to contact the police for assistance. Area residents did not look upon their particular problem as a "police matter", thereby they restricted their lobbying to political representatives. It was through this channel that the issue came to police attention. Here is a small example where cooperation, perseverance, and finally a little bit of luck, netted some positive results.

A letter of concern requesting action was drafted by a mother of four young children and sent to the area Alderman. The letter outlined a number of concerns regarding the activities around a neighbourhood playground. It was stated that the playground had attracted, and possibly became the "hang-out" of a group of teenagers whose presence and activities discouraged the use of this facility by younger children (for whom it was intended).

The letter was directed more towards action on the part of Edmonton Parks and Recreation and the Separate School Board. But there were two indirect references made to the police that would eventually cause the letter to take a different course from the Alderman's office. The first was a reference to the successes experienced with Beaverhills Park in downtown Edmonton. The author correctly pointed out that a redesign of Beaverhills Park had resulted in a reduction of open criminal activity. Despite this accurate analysis, the police role in promoting this architectural change was not recognized.

Secondly, the letter pointed out that some of the playground fixtures had been subjected to vandalism, presumably by these older children. Interestingly, the letter's author concluded that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to apprehend those responsible for the damage. Even though the letter seemed to imply the police would be powerless to stop this kind of activity, the suggestions of criminal acts likely caused the political authorities to forward the inquiry to police. Through the chain of command the letter was forwarded to Sgt. Kracher and Cst. Cooper, the turf officer for the Kernohan area.

Problem solving strategies and results :

From strictly a statistical, or calls for service standpoint, Kernohan Park playground could not be classified as a "problem location". An analysis of calls for service from spring of 1992 to fall of 1993 (thereby two summer seasons) revealed but four incidents. Two were for mischief to playground fixtures (a baseball backstop and one of the climbing structures), an act of off-road driving that tore up some turf, and a generic "trouble with youths". Even if it could be shown that these were all related incidents, it would not make Kernohan Park particularly unique. Over the course of two years many parks would be subject to similar treatment.

It became apparent that area residents had more information at their disposal than police and a truer appreciation of the magnitude of the problem. A meeting was set up with a representative group. It was learned that the park has fallen into disfavour with area parents and that many would not allow their children to visit there

unsupervised. Particularly in the evenings, even the adults felt ill at ease as they were subjected to glares and catcalls from older youths. Broken beer bottles were being found in the playground sand, there were reports of evening bonfires, and the occasional sexual liaison was being interrupted by those taking their dog for its evening walk. They fell short of prompting calls to police, rather they would just cause users to stay clear of the area. As the only playground facility for some distance, it made for an unfortunate situation for area children.

The community group was more than willing to give Cst Cooper and Sgt. Kracher a guided tour of the area. No doubt, area officers were unaware of the problem because it was not readily visible from the road. One could only gain a true appreciation once fifty yards off road. The natural setting of the park proved to be part of the problem.

Kernohan Park is a fiat, grassy area which also serves as the schoolground for Anne Fitzgerald School. Two large fields containing baseball diamonds and soccer pitches are connected by the playground area. Immediately to the east is a heavily wooded area that leads by ravine to the river valley. The wooded area has an extensive trail network. The nearest roadway is Clareview Road to the west. Even here the playground is recessed quite far from the road.

A stripmall complete with convenience store is situated across Clareview Road but is constructed so as to face away from the park. Two townhouse developments, one distantly north and one distantly west, serve as the only "eyes" on the Kernohan Park apart from the road itself. The end result is a playground that can pride itself in its natural setting, but is somewhat secluded.

To further complicate its setting, the designers of the park chose to complement the natural areas with contoured ground. Four berms were erected between the road and the park and they were planted with coniferous trees and shrubs. While aesthetically pleasing to the eye, this arrangement served to completely restrict vision to the park from the road or any nearby residences.

A good number of the residents concerns were substantiated by this tour. Broken glass was found among the sand. A number of the playground structures showed signs of abuse and minor dismantling. Of particular concern was the evidence of graffiti on some structures. Fortunately, graffiti remains a rare phenomenon in Edmonton and its incidence alone is a strong indicator of problems. It became apparent that the lack of calls for service had failed to signal a problem in this case.

As a next step, Sgt. Kracher contacted Parks and Recreation staff. They confirmed the situation as described by area residents. Kernohan Park had long been considered the "worst" park in the northeast sector in terms of damage and maintenance requirements. In fact, the playground was only a shadow of its former self. Because of vandalism and dismantling, many of the original playground structures had been removed as they were no longer safe. Budget restraints and prioritization precluded their replacement and it was generally felt it would be money poorly spent. For the most part, these incidents went unreported to police.

A further background check on this situation revealed this was anything but a "new" problem. The community league in the area confirmed it had been an issue for years. Past principals of Anne Fitzgerald School had requested changes to the park, oddly enough, so had Parks and Recreation workers. To this point, these pleas had fallen on deaf ears. To provide a clearer definition of what the community was trying to achieve and how it felt about the current situation, police assisted with a "safety audit". This was done in conjunction with the Mayor's Taskforce on Safer Cities and included a questionnaire for residents and a video tape of the area. The total package made for a more coordinated presentation and added focus to what the community organizers felt would be the most viable solution.

A meeting has held with one of the Parks and Recreation supervisors to reconcile the various agendas. There seemed to be consensus that changes were necessary, but what kind? It was acknowledged that the congregating of youths in and of itself was not the true problem. After all, playgrounds were designed to attract young persons, albeit not for destructive or disruptive purposes. Harking back to the Beaverhills experience, it was generally felt that a redesign of the park held the most promise.

To address this issue, the input of Cst. R. Desmeules was sought out. With expertise in CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design), Cst. Desmeules was able to suggest a more appropriate configuration of the surrounding grounds. This would allow for more visual access to the playground from adjacent areas. Among the recommendations were removal of the berms, alternative vegetation from coniferous trees to deciduous, trimming of brush from remaining natural treed areas, and cutting back of wooded areas extending from the ravine area. Hopefully this would go a long ways towards "opening" this area and give less savory users of the parks a less sheltered feeling.

This seemed to be a very straightforward proposal, but posed problems of its own. First of all, removal of the berms was not met with unanimous approval. Some area residents liked the contoured ground and the planted conifers. They had no children and tended not to venture too deeply into the park. As noted earlier, the problem was less visible from the roadway and beyond. Secondly, there is more to the playground construction than meets the eye. Drainage has to be considered as they are outfitted with a weeping tile network. The original park design clearly had taken the contour of the berms into account and it would be more than just a matter of bulldozing the ground flat. Then there were City ordinances and policies to consider. Planted trees, such as conifers, must be moved rather than destroyed. The expense of this alone would be an aggravating factor. Finally, underbrush around native poplar growths, is essential to the survival of these types of trees. The offer of a community organized "slash and burn" party to remove underbrush was politely declined by City biologists.

With financial requirements posing the major obstacle and threatening to bog this initiative down, the time became right for a stroke of luck. Area residents were understandably pleased to see the arrival of dump truck and tree movers one morning. However, their exasperation came full circle once they realized the workers were here to plant more trees, rather than reduce the vegetation as had been so eagerly sought through this initiative. It turned out this was a private contractor working on a standing list of environmental projects on behalf of the City as monies became available. Through a quirk of bureaucracy, his activities were out of sync with more updated demands.

Armed with the CPTED analysis and general agreement with Parks and Recreation administration, authority was granted for the community group to liaise directly with the landscape contractor. With remarkable speed and very modest cost as compared to earlier estimates, a modified plan was realized. The berms were reduced to less than half their original height, the spruce trees were transplanted to other projects down the standing list, and the brush expertly trimmed back with full consideration to the vegetation type.

The result is a playground that is considerably more visible from three directions. A compromise has been struck between appearance from the road and overall openness. There had been no attempt to exclude, or for that matter, even directly monitor, any particular age group. Follow-up interviews with park users indicated a renewed confidence in using the playground and allowing their young children to frequent it. There have been no further incidents of vandalism.

As the summer of 1995 approaches, an informal plan will be held in place by area officers to monitor the progress to date. Continued police presence and interaction with playground users will demonstrate that the playground is intended for all to enjoy and that "the community is watching". At the time of writing, there is hope that the playground is due for a facelift. In a recently distributed letter to parents and area residents, the principal from Anne Fitzgerald School advises that monies are available for playground reconstruction. Input from interested parties is being sought as to what type of enhancement is preferred. It is clear that the changes to date have given rise to a resurgence for Kernohan Park so it may again become a positive focal point in the community.