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Skateboarders Slowly Gain Right-of-way - And A Few Parks The Sport Long Has Been Restricted Or Banned As Dangerous. Some Communities, However, Are Building Places Just For It.

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Barely 10 minutes after the scofflaws hit the pavement of a quiet side street, a police cruiser pulled up.

"Gimme your boards," the officer ordered.

Three teenagers, their baggy jeans perilously low on their hips, had been caught flouting the law: No skateboarding on streets, sidewalks or alleys in Bridgeport, Montgomery County.

The rebels showed remorse, so the officer relented, letting them off with a stern warning. Which was a relief because they weren't so much trying to defy authority as to show why they need a place to call their own.

"We live here. We shouldn't have to go miles away to skate," Tim Hart, 14, said plaintively. "And if it's illegal on the streets, they should give us a park or something."

A park for skateboarders? For those dudes in backward baseball caps who dart between cars, plow into pedestrians, and gouge the granite in public plazas?

It's an idea whose time has not quite come. The dominant trend continues to be punitive, with more and more communities restricting or banning skateboarding as dangerous, destructive, even anti-social.

But it's an idea that is slowly gaining favor, as skaters - and their parents - lobby for recreational rights on par with such mainstream sports as basketball and tennis.

The city of Philadelphia is scheduled to open a skateboard park this spring. Another is in the works in Washington Township, Gloucester County. And Fad-Tastic, a Brighton, Colo., maker of skateboard ramps, says it has equipped a score of municipal parks around the country over the past five years.

"There have been people here who think skateboarding shouldn't be permitted," said Washington Township Mayor Gerald Luongo. "I say: 'Who are we to deny them?' But we need to put it where it can be done safely."

Just how hazardous is the 30-year-old amusement?

Skateboarding injuries hit a high of 150,000 in 1977, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, which issues an annual estimate based on a sampling of hospital emergency rooms. In 1993, injuries were suffered by 28,000 of the nation's 8 million skateboarders - or about four-tenths of 1 percent of them.

Moderate injuries, such as fractures, were most common; severe injuries, such as head injuries and internal bleeding, were uncommon; and deaths (five were reported last year) almost always involved collisions with motor vehicles, safety commission data show.

In the Philadelphia area, at least three youths have died in skateboard accidents since 1988. All three were riding after dark, without helmets, and were struck by cars.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, while not discouraging skateboarding, says injury patterns indicate that it is unsafe for children younger than 5; that wearing helmets and pads would reduce or prevent injuries; and that skateboards "must never be ridden near traffic."

"Communities should be encouraged to develop safe skateboarding areas away from pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic," the academy said in recommendations issued this month.

Under controlled, supervised conditions, skateboarding - jumps and all - is no more dangerous than roller skating or in-line skating, said Robert Roth, owner of Cheap Skates in Lansdale, one of a handful of for-profit skateboarding rinks on the East Coast.

Roth said he requires skaters to wear helmets and pads. Injuries, which are rare, have included broken ankles, broken wrists and a concussion.

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"I've had one lawsuit," Roth said. "A fellow got a splinter from the ramp. He finally dropped the suit."

At the five-year-old, city-owned Dodge Skateboard Park in Columbus, Ohio, the big problem hasn't been injuries, but meeting demand, said manager Donny Humes, 25. The fenced, outdoor park, which is open from afternoon until dark six days a week except in winter, has been broken into several times by avid users, he said.

ISSUE OF LIABILITY

Safety and liability concerns are the most frequently cited reasons for disallowing skateboarding on streets - and for not creating a place for it.

This is true even though insurance underwriters, lawyers and municipal government associations seem to have little data on accidents, claims or lawsuits.

"Frankly, I don't think there is a big skateboard litigation," said Ronald Grayzel, a lawyer with Levinson, Axelrod, Wheaton & Grayzel, in Edison, N.J., the state's biggest personal-injury firm.

In the last decade, ordinances restricting or banning skateboarding have been adopted by a growing list of municipalities, including Doylestown and Newtown in Bucks County, Lower Merion and Bridgeport in Montgomery County, Springfield in Delaware County, and Collingswood, Haddonfield and Moorestown in South Jersey. Violators are usually subject to fines up to \$300.

In Bridgeport, where complaints recently spurred a crackdown of the borough's six-year-old ordinance, Police Chief Zenny Martyniak declared that skateboards "are like projectiles. . . . We had one that went right through a car window a couple weeks ago."

So why not set up a park for skaters?

The question clearly irritated Bridgeport's borough manager, John Curran.

"Why don't you just come over here and stick needles in my eyes?" he said. "I can give you 30,000 reasons. That's how much it would cost us to get insurance" to cover such a park.

Insurance coverage can be a problem.

Officials in rural Honey Brook, Chester County - which has no anti-skateboarding ordinance - considered giving skaters permission to build ramps on a borough hockey field. Then officials discovered that under their self-insurance pool, they can't operate ski lifts, dams, medical clinics - or skateboard parks.

Neither can the 440 other municipalities in the pool, called the Pennsylvania Intergovernmental Risk Management Association.

But operators of skateboard facilities say affordable liability insurance is available to those who search hard enough. Roth, of Cheap Skates, said he found a policy for about \$7,000 a year after many carriers, including Lloyds of London, turned him away.

Luongo said the township's Keystone broker found insurance coverage for "a few thousand" dollars. "It's not excessive," Luongo said.

'A BAD REPUTATION'

Skateboarders and their fans believe a subtler obstacle - prejudice - has kept their sport on the fringes.

"Most of the reason is because they have a bad reputation, not because of accidents," said Kelly Barnes of Eastern Skateboard Supply, a large distributor in North Carolina. "They get blamed for a lot of things."

Skateboarders - a predominantly male, adolescent breed - have cultivated a nonconformist, do-your-own-thing image. Like surfers, skaters have their own style and slang. They're fond of talking about "me and my board" - no teams, no uniforms, no rules.

For a lot of adults, it all adds up to something unwholesome.

In Chester County, for example, the county commissioners last year passed an ordinance banning skateboarding on county property - along with loitering, vandalism, use of illegal drugs, and public urination.

Some skateboarders are deciding to work within the system. They're enlisting their parents, going to town meetings, making polite requests for their own space.

In Bristol Township, skaters last month asked the council for a place where "we can ollie," a reference to jumps skateboarders make. They didn't get their way, but council President Joseph Coffman commended them, saying: "They acted like gentlemen."

Some officials are also acknowledging the inequity of banning skateboards while ignoring a newer fad - in-line skates. Lower Merion, which currently bans skateboarding, is considering allowing the sport on "minor" streets - and extending restrictions to in-line skating.

Lower Merion Commissioner Brian D. Rosenthal, head of the recreation committee, is even open to the idea of a park: "No one's come to us with it, but I think that could be a good idea."

Parks aren't a panacea, everyone agrees. In Philadelphia, officials say they have no illusions that accommodating skaters with a park in South Philadelphia will stop their illegal forays into JFK Plaza - where the costly granite has been damaged.

But Mayor Rendell's administration (swayed by the mayor's skateboarding son) has taken the position that it won't ticket violators before offering an alternative.

That's fair enough, skateboarders say.

"It's not a fad," said Mark Ruggiano, 24, a former skateboarder who recently opened Method Sk8 Shop in Bridgeport. "They're going to skate even if they get arrested 500 times. So pass an ordinance that makes it safe and sanctioned, not an ordinance that takes it away."