

'There's no reason we shouldn't be here.'

We leave rubber on the ground, nothing that does any harm.' — LEWIS CAPP, 19

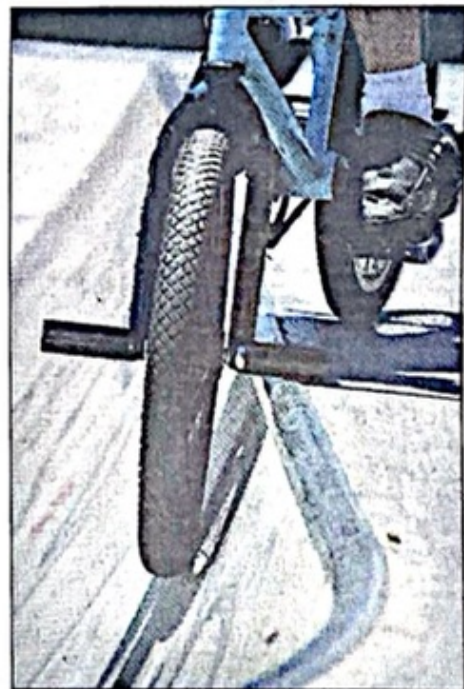


Judith Segami/DAILY REPUBLIC PHOTOS

LaMont Johnson, 15, jumps his bike up the lips of one of the bowls at the Rotary skatepark in Fairfield.

NO BIKERS ALLOWED!

Skatepark excludes bicycles to little effect



A biker grinds the front peg of his bicycle on the coping. Skatepark designers blame steel pegs for the concrete damage, shown below. The damage on the horizontal surface surrounding the bowls is worse at the seams between two sections.



Lewis Capp takes photos of Chris Savoy, 15, riding over a spine. Travis Painter rides behind.

By Shawn Miller
DAILY REPUBLIC

To look at the Rotary skatepark at Allan Witt Park, you'd think bicycles are allowed.

They aren't. But on any given day at the park, BMXers ride the concrete with their skateboarding brethren, catching air, grinding edges, encouraging one another, whistling at difficult tricks and laughing at crashes (provided they aren't too serious).

While these activities are perfectly commonplace, they are also wholly illegal and bikers who ride at the skatepark risk getting ticketed by the police.

Fairfield city code 12b.16a prohibits bicycles from using city skateparks.

Local bikers aren't happy that one of the largest skateparks in Northern California is off-limits to them. Many protested at the park's opening in July 2002.

"It (stinks)," said 15-year-old Chris Savoy, a skilled biker who often rides at the skatepark.

Most skateparks don't allow bikers to use their facilities.

At issue is whether bikers and skaters can safely use the facility simultaneously and whether bicycles, which are relatively large and heavy compared with skateboards, damage the skatepark.

SAFETY CONCERNS

The Rotary skatepark is a huge facility covering 25,840 square feet. Despite

the space, weekends find the skatepark crowded with skaters zipping around and flying through the air. Adding bikers to this mix in a park that wasn't designed to accommodate them is just too dangerous, according to Fairfield Park Planner Fred Beiner.

"A trick on a bike takes far more room than a trick on a skateboard. It takes more time to get up to speed. Not that biking is bad, but the two things don't cohabitate," Beiner said.

"It's an operational issue. For safety purposes, you'd have to separate the (skaters and bikers). The design would need to change to be compatible with bike use."

While not downplaying the danger of having fast bikes and slow skaters in the same park, skatepark designer Steve Rose, owner of Fullerton-based Purkiss Ross-RSI, doesn't think the layout of parks needs to be different for bikers than skaters.

"The bikers are very adaptable to whatever terrain we give them, so design isn't the problem," said Rose, who designed the Rotary skatepark.

Zach Wormhoudt, owner of the Santa Cruz-based skatepark design firm Wormhoudt Inc., created the plans for skateparks in Napa, Martinez and is working on a bike and skatepark in Benicia. He's an avid skater and thinks bikers are such a hazard to skaters that he will often leave a park if there are too many bikers.

"There's a risk to the skaters from the bicyclists," Wormhoudt said. "They go so much faster and have so much more momentum."

"They are cross traveling, so the

potential for an accident is there," said Fairfield Risk Manager Robyn Cain.

At the Rotary skatepark bikers and skaters appear to cohabitate quite peaceably. Part of the reason is the unspoken etiquette of skateparks where riders take turns using different areas of the park.

Kyle VanDyke is a 21-year-old skater who uses the Rotary skatepark four to five times a week and doesn't mind bikers using the facility at all. VanDyke also downplays the added danger bikers supposedly pose.

"It's a skatepark. There are going to be collisions," he said.

Bicycles have the added advantage of brakes, which skateboards don't. Jay Sloan, 27, is a biker with 20 years experience and while he understands bicycles are bigger and heavier than skateboards, he thinks bikers belong at the skatepark.

"If two people collide, the skaters are the ones who are gonna get hurt. People do collide sometimes. It's rare. People look out for each other. The park is big enough to handle everyone," Sloan said.

BIKER DAMAGE

Regardless whether bikers make a skatepark more dangerous or not, California cities don't incur any more liability if bikers and skaters use the same park than if it were just used by skaters.

California Government Code 831.7 states that a public entity is not liable

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Bikers

to any person that participates in a "hazardous recreational activity," which includes skateboarding and "bicycle racing or jumping."

The real issue park planners and skatepark designers worry over is damage to skateparks.

"Bikes damage the skatepark surface. It's that simple," Beiner said.

"It's pretty expensive to bike-proof a skatepark. Bicycles damage skateparks in a number of different ways. Mainly it's with the pegs," Wormhoudt said.

Pegs are the metal extensions on bicycle axles that riders stand on when doing tricks. When bikers crash, these pegs, as well as handlebar ends, can chip the concrete surface of the park.

"It's the type of damage that is difficult to repair. There are patching products. But it's like filling the cavity of someone who is going to eat Pop Rocks (candy). There is no sustainable fix," Wormhoudt said.

Rose disagrees. When concrete becomes pockmarked, the area can be cored, which requires removing a circular piece of concrete around the damaged area and replacing it with a piece of the same size. "That's pretty bullet safe," Rose said.

While pockmarked concrete makes little difference to bikers, the small wheels of a skateboard can get stuck in the rut, sending the skater off his board, Beiner said.

The other damage pegs can create is on handrails and around the metal lip, or coping, of the skatepark, which is similar to PVC piping. The coping is made of galvanized steel.

Bikers often do tricks where they slide along the coping on their pegs. This trick is called a grind and for good reason.

"The pegs are a hardened steel and are textured to provide grip. That material is harder than the coping. . . . Over time they are literally wearing through the park when they use it. They wear through the pipe coping," Wormhoudt said.

"When they grind on the metal it makes it gnarly," Rose said. "This affects the quality of the grinding for skaters. Some pegs have a diamond pattern, which is just like a file."

Though skaters grind on the coping too, their axles are made of aluminum, which is softer than the coping.

When bikers grind on skatepark coping, their pegs can also rut the concrete above the lip. When water pools in the ruts, the problem gets worse.

"It's like a pothole in the road," Wormhoudt said.

ASSESSING THE HARM

The Rotary skatepark has



Bicyclists wait and watch while a skateboarder rides by at the Rotary skatepark in Fairfield. Bicyclists and skateboarders take turns using the bowls.

been open for a year and shows some signs of wear. The concrete deck above two half-bowls - a favorite area for bikers - is rutted, presumably from bicycle pegs. The problem is especially pronounced where separate pieces of concrete are joined.

"The park is inspected daily," Beiner said. "There are places where you can see the damage to the park. Those imperfections cause a safety issue."

VanDyke hasn't noticed much damage from bikers, except for the rutting. "We could fix that ourselves with concrete," he said.

The skatepark in Vacaville, which has been open since 2000, also bars bikers, though this has little real effect.

"They use it. They can get in," said Vacaville Recreation Supervisor Suzanne Greene of the bikers.

"We examine the park every single day for damage to the concrete. The only problem we've had from a damage standpoint is graffiti," Greene said. "I haven't heard any ill effects from (bikers) being there."

Skateparks can be made bike-proof, or close to bike-proof, with some minor detailing. Rose said that a denser concrete can be used to avoid chipping, though Wormhoudt said his firm makes concrete "as strong as it can possibly be" for all parks.

The primary difference between a bike-proof park and one that isn't is the metal coping.

"If we know bikes will use the park, we use a wider coping, so we don't get the gouging. And we use a harder steel," Rose said. This wider coping extends 6 inches beyond the lip of the skatepark

edge and protects the skatepark deck from pegs.

"If bikers just take off the pegs that can eliminate a significant amount of damage," Wormhoudt said.

Peg covers made of a PVC-like material can reduce damage as well, Rose said.

The cost of making a skatepark bike-proof during the design phase varies depending on the park size, but Rose and Wormhoudt put the cost between \$10,000 and \$50,000.

The Rotary skatepark cost about \$715,000.

Making an existing skatepark bike proof is extremely difficult.

"In my experience, it's really hard to do after the fact," Wormhoudt said.

"We have not retrofitted a park for bikes, but we have retrofitted parks that didn't have (the wider coping)," Rose said.

SKATEPARKS FOR EVERYONE

Fairfield and Vacaville have discovered that keeping bikers out of unsupervised skateparks is next to impossible.

"Pretty much the police are responsible for enforcing the rules (at the skatepark)," Greene said of Vacaville's skatepark.

The same is also true at the Rotary skatepark and bikers complain of daily visits by the police telling them to leave and threatening them with tickets.

"When we're called and when there's available time, (we go to the skatepark)," said Fairfield police Lt. Michael Hill. "There's an officer assigned to Allan Witt Park. The police go when we can and

when we're called."

Hill said he did not know how many tickets have been issued to bikers in the skatepark and that a police officer has discretion over whether to issue a ticket or not.

"I've seen bike cops at the skatepark, but they've seen me ride and didn't bother me," said Travis Painter, 17, of Crockett. Other bikers claim not to have been so lucky.

"The obvious response is, why don't you just design all skateparks for bikes in case they get in there," Wormhoudt said.

Some cities are doing just that.

The City of Hawthorn in Southern California is opening a skatepark Saturday that was designed by Purkiss Ross-RSI and will be open to bikers as well as skaters.

"There was an interest from some of the kids in the community for a skatepark. We're one of the first to allow bikers in a skatepark in this area. The park was designed for it," said Hawthorn Director of Recreation and Community Services Michelle Winters.

"What we did is we built it for BMXers because they already use other skateparks. We decided to build the park so it would be open for both, so we wouldn't have the problem we knew would have. We're going to try it out and see how they coexist," Winters said.

The park will be open to skaters during certain hours and bikers at others, though the facility will be unsupervised.

"It's really going to be an honor system for a while and we're going to watch it really close," Winters said.

Benicia is following a similar path. Wormhoudt is designing a skate and bike park for the city that could open as soon as spring 2004.

Superintendent of Parks and Community Services Mike Dotson said bikers expressed an interest in using the skatepark early in the planning process and were therefore included.

While bikers and skaters will be allowed to use the park, they won't be allowed in at the same time.

BIKER GRIPES

The BMX community never expressed an interest in being part of the skatepark design process, according to Beiner. The park was only intended for use by skaters as a result.

"From the very early stages, the park was designed as a skatepark, not a skate and bike park," Beiner said.

"Even before the park opened, we've been trying to get the BMX community to get together and sit down with us. They haven't wanted to do it or haven't been organized enough to do it," Beiner said. "We're still more than willing to sit across from people (and talk)."

Many bikers feel left out, harassed and bared from a

public park because of the Rotary skatepark's policy.

"There's no reason we shouldn't be here. We leave rubber on the ground, nothing that does any harm. The reason Fairfield doesn't allow bikes is because everybody does the same thing," said Lewis Capp, 19.

Capp and his friends spend their time dirt jumping when they aren't at the skatepark, though the dirt is too dry in the summer and too wet in the winter, leaving a short jumping season.

Sloan thinks the cyclical nature of biking's popularity to blame for their exclusion from the skatepark.

"At the time (the skatepark was designed) it probably wasn't worth it for the city to put up a park just for bikers because there weren't that many of us. It's kind of unfortunate because you get in trouble for using public property," Sloan said.

Rebecca Rundlett is a 15-year-old skater who wants to see bikers invited in.

"Everybody should be allowed to use the park. It's for the kids," Rundlett said.

Bikers aren't holding their breath waiting for that day to come, however.

"It would be nice, but I think I've become a little jaded," Sloan said.

"I don't get harassed, but if I did, I'd still ride," Painter said. "It's better to not be hassled than to be hassled."

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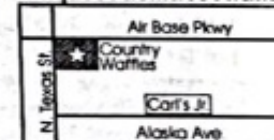
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to see them. Stories and legends, family histories and current plans for the future, fun times and sad times, we want everyone who lives here or used to live here to help us learn what shaped our town and the neighbors who call Fairfield home. Please tell us your stories so we can make this section really special. After all, we're only going to do it once every 100 years.

If you have a story, photos or artifacts to share, please contact Kathleen L'Ecluse at klecluse@dailyrepublic.net, 427-6993 or the Daily Republic, 1250 Texas St., Box 47, Fairfield, Calif. 94501.



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