

Press Release:

Manatee County's first completed All Inclusive ADA Playground to be dedicated on March 4th 2024 at 1pm.

The dedication of Manatee County's first completed All Inclusive ADA Playground at Lewis Park in Bradenton, will be formally dedicated on Monday, March 4th at 1 pm.

Rotary Clubs in Manatee County, in partnership with the City of Bradenton, have developed an all-inclusive playground experience in Bradenton's Lewis Park that provides recreational and active-living opportunities to every child in our region. The Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant playground is the first completed purpose-built destination of its kind in the area, serving children of all ages and abilities in the City of Bradenton, Manatee County, and our surrounding areas.

The project was spearheaded by Rotary Clubs of Manatee County, a network of several Rotary Club organizations based in Manatee County. This new playground at Lewis Park includes two designated inclusive play areas for children ages 2-5 and 5-12, respectively, as well as a separate swing set that can accommodate a child in a wheelchair.

The \$463,000 ADA-compliant playground was made possible through a partnership between the City of Bradenton and the Rotary's Suncoast Playground Projects, Inc., which obtained community donations from organizations, businesses and individuals.

Lewis Park is considered a neighborhood park with shade trees, walking trails, two gazebos and grills. It is situated on First Avenue West between 30th and 31st Streets. The project began after a grandmother approached Rotary to help her grandson, Easton, who is confined to a wheelchair. She explained to the Rotarians that there was no playground in Manatee County for Easton to enjoy, said Tom Norton, who heads the Rotary's Suncoast Playground Projects, Inc. "Our Rotary Club was very interested in helping, so we put together a plan," Norton said.

"The entire team is profoundly grateful for every contribution, large and small, that we have received," Norton said. "Our mission of providing an inclusive playground that every child can enjoy is becoming a reality. Thank you to everyone who has helped us get closer to that goal."

For Easton, the playground has been a long time coming, said his mother, Jennifer Crofoot. Born with spina bifida, Easton will never walk. Although that has not slowed the charismatic, naturally happy boy, she said. "He can do anything that his friends can do; he just has to do it differently," Crofoot said. "In fact, when he was a little kid, some of his friends would go home and tell their parents that they wanted a wheelchair, too." Crofoot said it was her mother who first approached the Rotary Club for help with a playground for Easton. At the time, she and her mother didn't realize they would be starting an eight-year campaign. "The City of Bradenton has been incredible. We're glad everything is happening now, as it should," Crofoot said. She is hoping to host Easton's birthday at the playground.

The City of Bradenton was proud to come on board and offer a place for the specialized playground, said Mayor Gene Brown. “Working with the Rotary Club on this ADA compliant playground is something the City of Bradenton and all of its residents can be proud of,” Brown said. “We want no child to be excluded from enjoying our neighborhood parks. We are so grateful for the efforts of the Rotary Club, and we can’t wait to see our children enjoying this beautiful park.” Vice Mayor Marianne Barnebey echoed the Mayor’s thoughts. She represents the city’s Ward Two, the district where Lewis Park is located. “The City of Bradenton is working to upgrade all of its neighborhood parks to be ADA compliant,” she said. “We are grateful to the Rotary Club for its donation of almost a half a million dollars to support the City in this effort to convert Lewis Park to have a playground that all kids can enjoy. Having a community partner to do this means that we can get to other parks sooner. We are thrilled to be able to offer community parks that will serve all children who want to use it.”

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The "Liberty Swing" so that children in wheelchairs can enjoy the freedom of being on a swing.

