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## Inclusive park fundraising begins in Noble

BY MATT GETTS

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ALBION — The idea has been around for some time.

But the new Diamond Discovery Zone is finally taking shape — at least on paper.

Financing for the project? That's gotten a big boost, too.

Earlier this month, the Albion Town Council gave its approval for \$250,000 in TIF funding to be used for the new inclusive playground planned for Hidden Diamonds Park.

The Albion Redevelopment Commission had recommended the funds be used for the park.

The total cost of the project is estimated to range from \$350,000-\$450,000, the final amount dependent on how much a special committee can raise in addition to that nice \$250,000 nest egg provided by the EDC and the town council.

The committee plans for construction of the park to take place in 2027.

Jalyssa Kessler, chief executive officer at The Arc Noble County Foundations, shares co-chair committee responsibilities with Albion Parks Department Superintendent Casey Myers.

"To have the council behind us says a lot," Kessler said.

The committee is applying for a grant with the AWS Foundation. The foundation's mission is to "support children and adults with intellectual, developmental and physical disabilities live as independently as possible, be included and involved in the community and to live their life to the fullest."

### What does all-inclusive mean?

The website PlayWorld.com provides a definition for both ADA accessible and inclusive playgrounds.

**Accessible:** Any playground that can be entered or reached without challenge, making it open to any and every child, can be considered accessible. For example, a wheelchair-accessible playground is designed to allow wheelchairs to easily maneuver between pieces of equipment so anyone in a wheelchair can access all the playground features without issue.

**Inclusive:** An inclusive playground helps children of all backgrounds and abilities feel a sense of belonging by ensuring every



MATT GETTS

This rendering shows a possible, partial layout for the Diamond Discovery Zone, an all-inclusive park planned for Hidden Diamonds Park in Albion.

child can fully engage with the equipment without limitations. An inclusive playground enriches play for everyone by providing a variety of sensory experiences that children of all abilities can enjoy."

PlayWorld.com calls all-inclusive parks the "gold standard" for parks.

The website explains that "Inclusive playgrounds expand upon accessibility by creating an environment that encourages both disabled and able-bodied kids to interact with the playground equipment and each other to build connections."

It's really a togetherness thing.

Parents who have a wheelchair bound child often have to choose between an ADA-accessible playground, which may not appeal to their other children, and a playground where the wheelchair bound child feels left out.

The Diamond Discovery Zone playground will feature a main structure similar to what is found at other parks with slides and jungle gym type equipment. The big difference is that there will be no steps

leading up to the structure, but ramps.

"We want to be inclusive and not segregate," Kessler said. "We want everybody to play."

Surrounding the main structure will be a variety of different stations, all with a different set of skills that can be used by any variety of youngsters.

"We can make it a space for the entire family to play," Kessler said.

The swing sets planned for the park are a good example. There will be a traditional child swing, a swing for all ages and a special high-backed swing for those with disabilities.

The beauty of the park is its versatility. The high-backed chair swing, for example, can be used for those children who have advanced out of the child swing but aren't quite ready for the swing that older youngsters use.

The entire area will be fenced-in, a relief for parents concerned with toddlers or others wandering off.

There will be 12 paved ADA parking

spots set aside as well.

### Long time coming

The project has been in the works for a long time in Albion.

"This has been on the radar for 10-15 years," Myers said. "It's been in (the parks department's) master plan the last eight years."

Members of the general public have been calling for such a park, and a year or so ago, those voices reached a crescendo.

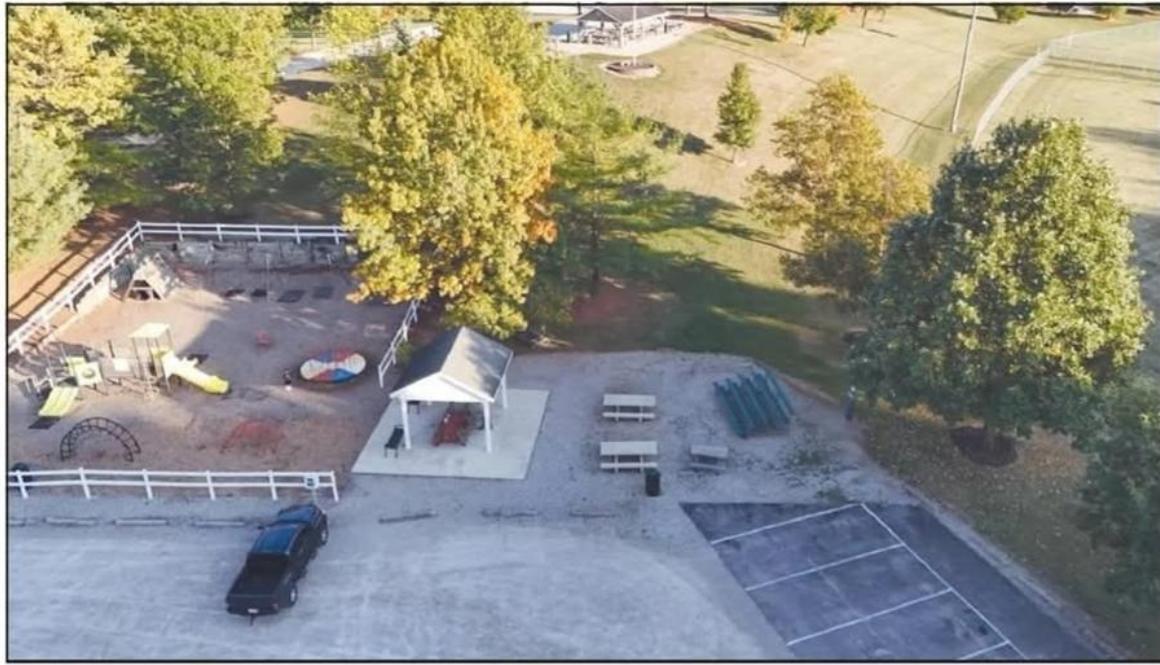
Parents weren't just calling for the creation of an all-inclusive park, they were volunteering to sit on the committee.

"When you have people who want to sit on a committee, you know it's time," Myers said.

Members of the committee, along with Myers and Kessler, are Sonia Hall, Steve Gunty, John Wakeman, Jamie Howard and Tiffany Parker.

The committee has been incredibly active, with members visiting 10

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**The Diamond Discovery Zone, an all-inclusive park, will be located where the current park sits next to the ball diamonds at Hidden Diamonds Park in Albion, but will extend to where the picnic tables and chairs are located.**

## **INCLUSIVE: Goal to have park complete in 2027**

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inclusive playgrounds throughout the area, traveling as far as Michigan City.

"We have a very dedicated committee, that's for sure," Kessler said.

Myers expressed great appreciation for the entire committee.

"I'm grateful," Myers said. "It takes people."

"We have a committee

that doesn't have an issue dreaming," Kessler said.

Only two of the 10 parks the committee has visited have ramps for their main playground structure. Eight of the 10 have a mulch bed, which isn't great for wheel-chair bound persons.

The committee would like to see the equipment placed on a surface more similar to a track, but more spongy.

Kessler said the park's amenities figure to be a big draw for people outside of the Albion area.

The committee plans on hitting up local service groups and charitable foundations to make the Diamond Discovery Zone a reality.

The Albion Town Council set up a special fund at the Noble County Community Foundations for holding the donations.