

The Politics of Playgrounds: Part 1

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(Update 3:10 PM: City recreation officials have informed us that they are in the process of fixing problems at the American Legion playground, which we highlighted in our report. Read below for more information).

As part of the latest budget crisis gripping Philadelphia, all city agencies have given **Mayor Michael Nutter** a list of recommendations for how to cut operations in their departments by 10 percent, 20 percent and 30 percent. City recreation officials have indicated that if Nutter cuts their department by 20 percent or 30 percent, there will be a negative impact on maintenance and safety at facilities because less people will be on the job to do the work.

But recreation officials are still reeling from the last round of budget cuts in November 2008, when the Mayor cut funding for the city's ice skating rinks and swimming pools. In response, Philadelphia Flyers chairman **Ed Snider** put up the financial support to help keep open the ice rinks. But recreation officials are still scrambling with a fundraising campaign to keep open at least 30 of the city's 72 swimming pools this summer.

Recreation commissioner **Susan Slawson** has kept community involvement at the forefront of her organization. She's been urging city residents to frequent the facilities, participate in clean-ups, and keep an eye out for graffiti artists or

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drug dealers at the facilities.

But one of Slawson's first major hurdles as commissioner came this past summer after she started the job. At the time, City Controller **Alan Butkovitz** released an [audit](#) citing the recreation department for safety violations at 75 facilities in 2007, then under Slawson's predecessor. In October, we [interviewed Slawson about the audit](#), which she assigned her deputy commissioner of operations, **Michael Johnson**, to tackle.

This month, we met with Johnson to see what progress had been made. He presented us with a thick report that his staff recently put together. Johnson flipped through the report page by page, and showed us before and after shots of each photograph cited in the Butkovitz audit.



Michael Johnson and the recreation department's response to the Butkovitz audit

In response to the audit, Johnson says his staff processed 72 new work orders that included fixing fences, removing overgrown weeds, painting, repairing restroom plumbing, covering exposed wiring and unclogging drains and vents. His staff cleaned more than 1600 of the 2000 vents currently in operation at various facilities, and will finish the rest by the end of the spring. Besides generating healthier air inside the facilities, Johnson says the cleaned vents are running more efficiently and are expected to save the city some money.

Johnson says he appreciated the Butkovitz audit because it helped him understand crucial safety concerns at facilities, set priorities, and create new inspection systems. He expects the new procedures to make his staff more responsive and efficient, as well as generate savings by addressing problems in a timely manner and focusing more on preventative maintenance. Johnson already believes his staff is making progress. Here are some benchmarks he says his staff has accomplished over the last six months:

Reduced Backlog of Work Orders from 2,461 orders to 769. The backlog included some requests dating back to 2001. Johnson's staff dismissed orders requiring capital improvements worth \$15,000 or more, which the city's Department of Public Property must handle; and also eliminated orders to do upgrades for equipment already in good working order.

Reduced Average Response Time to Complete Work Orders. Last year at this

time, it took recreation personnel 247 days to complete a work order. Today, it takes the department, on average, 47.8 days to get the job done.

Completed 275 playground work orders.

Operation Clean Start. Johnson's staff launched this initiative to clean up and fully repair recreational facilities. The strategy involves deploying 80% of the recreation department's personnel, and volunteers from the community for three days at the targeted site. Since October, recreation officials have carried out Operation Clean Start at 12 recreational facilities. By using volunteers, Johnson says the city has saved \$269,000 cleaning up those 12 facilities. Additional cleanups are scheduled for this spring.

New Maintenance Procedures will be implemented. Caretakers at each facility will do daily inspections for safety hazards and remove any debris. The caretaker's supervisor will do weekly inspections. The supervisor's manager will do inspections twice a month.

New Inspection Form will be used. Here's a [draft of the form](#). It's more detailed than previous forms used by the department. Caretakers at the facilities, supervisors, and managers will use it to list problems, solutions, and future preventative maintenance plans to keep problems from reoccurring.

When we met with Michael Johnson and several of his staff members, we showed them photographs of the American Legion Playground that one of our readers, **Beth Ann Leach**, sent us. One photo reveals a missing hand rail on the way up to a sliding board, where her three year old son Jarret has fallen several times as a result.



Missing handrail up to slide at Philadelphia's American Legion playground

Several other photos show a hole boarded-up to cover where a sliding board used to be. But the hole is boarded-up on one side and not on the other. Leach believes the hole should be boarded-up on both sides because children climb in it and sit there. As a result, she says the board is weakening and could soon collapse and cause a child to get hurt.



Inside view of hole where children sit at Philadelphia's American Legion playground



Outside view of boarded-up hole at Philadelphia's American Legion playground. Leach fears the board could collapse and a child could get hurt.

In response to Leach's photos, Johnson and his staff said they would install a hand rail where the one is currently missing. But they did not commit to boarding up the hole on both sides as Leach has requested.

After publishing our story this morning, city recreation officials informed us this afternoon that they are taking care of the above problems at the American Legion Playground that concerned our reader, Beth Ann Leach. As a result, a new hand rail has been installed and will be painted in a couple days.



Here's the new hand rail city recreation officials have installed at Philadelphia's American Legion playground

City recreation officials have also decided to cap the hole that Leach was concerned about. The hole will be boarded up on both sides to prevent children from sitting there in the future. We also want to let you that Michael Johnson, deputy commissioner for operations at the recreation department, has requested that residents contact him directly with complaints, concerns or photos. Here's the [link](#) where you can find contact information for Michael Johnson and his operations staff.

Read [Part 2](#) about why some Philadelphia playgrounds are missing swing sets and other playground equipment.

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