

Safe place to exercise Antlers parents propose park for skateboarding

ANTLERS When Travis Williams and his friends want to go skateboarding, they head for the parking lots of local banks, churches or businesses, or any other slab of concrete they can find.

But Williams, 15, hopes the teenagers in this small southeastern Oklahoma town soon will have their own place to skateboard, bike, rollerblade and congregate. He is among about a dozen youths involved in a community project to open a skate park in Antlers.

"We won't be skating around town anymore. It's give us a place to go so we won't get run over," he said. "We've talked about it a lot before, but now that it's actually getting close to happening, it's pretty cool."

Chuck Battles, William's stepfather, is chairman of the Antlers Skate Park Committee. He said the project's driving forces are the local teens, Epsilon Sigma Alpha service sorority and Pushmataha County Turning Point Coalition. The Antlers Policy Department, state Transportation and Commerce departments, Choctaw Nation and local businesses are among the project's supporters.

"We've got a lot of interested parents who are willing to go out there and work on it. The whole community's really behind it, he said. It's really been a sport that's growing in our town. There really are a lot of kids that are doing this, a lot more than I thought.

Arlinda Copeland, southeast Turning Point field consultant, said the project fits in with the Turning Point goal of improving public health through community partnerships. The Choctaw County Coalition also is working to open a skate park in Hugo.

"It impacts pretty much every element, from safety to structured recreation to physical fitness to economic development to community beautification," Copeland said.

Skate park location options Long considered and extreme sport, skateboarding has become mainstream over the years. While most of the skaters in Antlers are teens, Battles said some elementary school-age children are picking up the sport.

The youths don't generally cause trouble or behave destructively as they skate across town, he said, but it would be better and safer if they had their own place. In researching the project, he learned that many skating accidents are caused by irregular surfaces that are uneven, upswept or damaged.

Battles said Epsilon Sigma Alpha has raised \$5,000 for the project. The committee has talked to the city council and school board about converting half the tennis courts by the city pool into the skate park. The tennis courts have the necessary infrastructure, including a slab, lights and fencing.

He said the school board, which owns the property, is considering the proposal and hasn't made a decision.

If the committee can't convert the tennis courts, it will look at other options, including the much more expensive prospect of building the skate park from scratch.

Once the infrastructure is set, the committee will consult with local youths on the types of ramps, jumps and equipment they want. Several teenage skaters attended a recent vendor exposition in Hugo to get ideas.