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**Parks offer diverse range of activities**

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Staff Writer

From innovative skate ramps to traditional baseball fields, South Plainfield's nine parks can satisfy every resident's recreational desire.

Outdoor lovers can smack tennis balls, shoot hoops, jog on the paths or just sit by a lake, making the borough's diverse recreational program attractive to many current and former residents, says Michael English, borough recreation director.

"It's a clean, safe community that offers them everything that young families need," says English, a lifelong resident who has been director for four years. "It's one of the reasons why people stay here."

The parks vary in size, from Willow Skate Park, the smallest at 2.18 acres, to Veterans Park, the largest with more than 30 acres.

But Veterans has been closed since last summer after officials began investigating the discovery of asbestos tiles and a mysterious black ooze surfacing at the park.

Borough officials, who have submitted a cleanup plan to the state Department of Environmental Protection for its approval, hope to open the park by the end of spring.

Because Veterans Park has the largest ball field, English had to reduce the number of adult male teams in the softball league last year, a popular activity among residents, he says.

But removing possibly hazardous materials is not the only work being done at borough parks.

Putnam Park is the midst of a complete renovation, with the first phase of the project to be completed by March.

The project will be adding a jogging path, off-site parking and a volley ball court, English says.

Restroom facilities and an Olympic-size soccer field also will be built.

He says baby-boomers are using the parks more than ever as Central Jerseyans become more health-conscious.

"Ten years ago, kids just went to the park as much they do (today), but the adults are now using park facilities more than adults 10, 15 years ago would," he says.

Two years ago, the borough doubled the size of its Police Athletic League building on Maple Avenue, which allowed for the expansion of a year-around weight room that supports some of the park upgrades, English says.

For example, a new miniature golf course and pool slides at the community pool on Maple Avenue were funded by the gym's profits and not by taxpayers.

It costs \$100 for an annual membership to the gym, English says.

Resident Frank Irber, a father of three daughters, ages 19, 17 and 11, says he has nothing to complain about when it comes to the borough park system.

"I'm happy with everything," says Irber, whose children played in the borough's softball programs. "I've never had any problems."

\*

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Park list

Location of parks, activities offered and hours of operation:

- \* Veterans Park, Elm Street: Picnic area, basketball, softball, playground, soccer fields, restrooms. Hours: 9 a.m. to 10 p.m.
- \* Putnam Park, Oak Tree Road: Playground, soccer field, jogging path, handball, v olley ball.
- \* Pitt Street Park, Pitt Street: Three softball fields, restrooms. Hours: 9 a.m. to dusk.
- \* PAL Field, Maple Avenue: Softball field, youth soccer field. Hours: 9 a.m. to dusk.
- \* Shady side Park, Yurgel Drive: Playground, basketball, multipurpose field. Hours: 9 a.m. to dusk.
- \* Cotton Street Park, Cotton Street: Playground, basketball. Hours: 9 a.m. to dusk.
- \* Walnut Street Park, Walnut Street: Playground, multipurpose field. Hours: 9 a.m. to dusk.
- \* Willow Skate Park, behind borough hall: two inline hockey rinks, skate park. Hours: weekdays - 3 p.m. to dusk; Saturday - 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday - Noon to 5 p.m.
- \* Spring Lake Park, Plainfield Avenue: Basketball courts, tennis courts, playground, jogging path, benches, gazebo. Hours: 8 a.m. to dusk. Park is owned and operated by Middlesex County .

STAFF PHOTO BY ED PAGLIARINI

A visitor strolls past a goose-filled lake at Spring Lake Park in South Plainfield. From skating to strolling to sports, the borough's parks offer activities of every stripe.

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