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Park to serve disabled kids

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In a city known for its many parks, not one is equipped for children with special needs.

But thanks to a determined couple and a unanimous decision by the Temple Terrace City Council on Feb. 16, that scenario is going to change.

At the request of resident Wally Blain, who stood up on behalf of his wife, Renee, and their 7-year-old daughter, Allie, the council approved a motion to make Riverhills Park an accessible playground for children with physical disabilities.

Allie, the younger of the Blains' two daughters, was diagnosed a little more than two years ago with idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura, an immune disorder in which her spleen attacks her body's platelets, the blood-clotting agents that help protect people from internal bleeding. If she were to fall on asphalt and skin her knee or nick herself on a piece of metal, it could be fatal.

The project will be in partnership with the Hillsborough County school district, which has property rights to the site adjacent to Riverhills Elementary and will help fund improvements to its current playground. The city's leisure services department is charged with expanding the park and maintaining the grounds.

"The partnership gives the city the opportunity to make the playground so much better," said James Chambers, director of leisure services.

Through fundraising efforts under the umbrella of Clouds of Hope, an organization the couple founded on behalf of Allie and other youngsters faced with life-altering conditions, the Blain family has agreed to cover the cost of architectural plans. They also will help raise money for items such as handicapped-accessible equipment and a rubberized ground covering.

Renee calls the council's decision an answer to lots of prayers.

"We are just so excited it's finally becoming a reality. It's been an 18-month process," Renee said. "But we still have a long road ahead in making it become a reality."

City Manager Kim Leinbach labeled the decision a "meritorious" move for Temple Terrace.

And Councilman Mark Knapp called it a "smart move."

"It's about time," he said.