



March 7, 2018

To whom it may concern:

It is an honor to submit this letter in support of the Nature Play Area being designed by the City of Ashland at the North Mountain Park Nature Center. I am a faculty member at Southern Oregon University in both the School of Education and in Environmental Education. I serve on the Advisory Board for the North Mountain Park Nature Center and have been involved with the Nature Center since it was created almost 20 years ago. In addition to my work in education and environmental education I also have a degree in Recreation and Park Administration, and after over 35 years of working in this field, I am convinced that children need to truly become immersed in nature in order to feel connected with it and ultimately grow into stewards to protect and manage our precious natural areas. There is a documented need for a Nature Play Area in our region.

The graduate program in Environmental Education at Southern Oregon University is currently the only North America Association of Environmental Education (NAAEE) accredited program on the west coast. We are honored to partner with the North Mountain Park Nature Center for internships and various other high quality projects related to their curriculum and community work. With no exceptions, their programs are grounded in best practices and reveal how the outdoors can be an engaging learning laboratory.

The research and skilled design work done by the staff at the North Mountain Park Nature Center staff, particularly Manager, Libby VanWyhe, demonstrates the solid commitment and dedication to this project. One of the most important elements (beyond the initial design) is the careful long-term planning to ensure its maintenance, safety, evaluation, and long-term sustainability. The commitment from partners such as Ashland Parks & Recreation, Little Gnomes Nature School, and the Ashland Forest Resiliency Project will help implement these critical components.

The benefits of a nature play area have been clearly documented in peer-reviewed journals and collectively this body of research shows that children's social, psychological, academic and physical health is positively impacted when they have daily contact with nature. Specifically, a Nature Play Area would support multiple developmental domains, support creativity and problem solving, enhance cognitive abilities, improve academic performance, reduce Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) symptoms, increase physical activity, improve nutrition, improve eyesight, improve social relations, improve self-discipline, and reduce stress.

Please give this grant request your kind consideration. It is a brilliant design with a well-documented, research-base rationale. I look forward to bringing my graduate students to the park in the future where the Nature Play Area will serve as an icon of best practices and a "lab school" for other communities.

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Sincerely,

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