

Designing Belonging

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Loveland, Colorado, built a universal access playground and park at Willow Bend Park and Natural Area with input from disability advocates and local families.

Attachment A



How universal access lives at the heart of Loveland, Colorado's new park

By Will Coleman

When City of Loveland, Colorado, set out to build its first universal access playground and park, the goal was a true destination where people of all ages and abilities could participate in play, movement and community life side by side.

Located along the East Big Thompson Trail and adjacent to preserved open space, [Willow Bend Park and Natural Area](#) is a landscape shaped with deep intention, informed directly by disability advocates and local families, and rooted in the belief that access for all is not an optional feature, but rather an imperative to facilitate the highest levels of usability.

Across the country, communities are reconsidering what it means for parks to be welcoming to all. Willow Bend reflects Loveland’s leadership in that shift: an investment not simply in accessible equipment, but also in the shared experiences that create belonging. For the Dig Studio team, it was an opportunity to help translate those values into physical form, and to rethink what becomes possible when welcoming all is the starting point, not the end goal.

A Vision Years in the Making

The foundation for Willow Bend began long before our team sketched a single concept. Loveland’s 2014 Parks and Recreation Master Plan identified a deficiency in parkland in the rapidly developing southeast quadrant of the city, as well as a

strong community desire for increased adaptive and accessible play opportunities. In response, Loveland purchased an 80-acre parcel of land in 2016 as a site for a new park and open space facility.

The vision for the project quickly evolved to include the city’s first universal access playground — one designed with the disability community in mind rather than one that was simply compliant with minimum accessibility standards. With the support of park and recreation staff and leadership and funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, Colorado Department of Transportation through its regional trail investment, the city’s capital funds, and the Open Lands and Trails program, the momentum was finally in place.

Their early concept sketches held promise: a community-hub play-

ground, a multiuse sports field and trail connections into the natural area. But the site — a former alfalfa field with a broad, gentle grade — offered a canvas far richer than a flat playscape. We saw the opportunity to let landform itself shape the experience and support access in ways that would feel intuitive, adventurous and joyful.

Our charge became to design a park where people of all abilities could navigate independently, explore confidently and engage at their own level of comfort and challenge. To do that, we committed to two guiding principles:

1. Access had to extend far beyond the playground.
2. People with disabilities had to meaningfully shape the design.

Every major decision flowed from those commitments.



Willow Bend Park and Natural Area incorporates a universal access playground, a sports field and trail connections into the landscape, creating a cohesive play and recreation experience integrated with nature.

IMAGE COURTESY OF DIG STUDIO

Loveland involved parents, veterans, caregivers and people with disabilities in the planning process to prioritize belonging for all.

Designing With, Not For

City Councilor Andrea Samson, a passionate disability advocate and parent of a child with disabilities, helped us connect with Loveland's disability steering committee early in the process. We met with them repeatedly in small and conversational sessions, which became some of the most defining moments in the project.

Parents, veterans, caregivers and individuals with disabilities shared honest insights about what helps them feel welcomed, what causes frustration or discomfort, and what would make this park a place they could use with ease and joy. Their input fundamentally reshaped the project.

Here are a few insights that guided the design in powerful ways.

Establish quiet places to retreat — without leaving the action. Families emphasized the need for spots where children could step away from stimulation without losing sight of caregivers or peers. Their input inspired the sensory pod, a shaded, interactive retreat space that offers visual, tactile and auditory engagement at a gentler pace.

Create wider walkways for learning mobility. Parents described how children learning to use mobility devices often feel vulnerable when navigating narrow sidewalks. In response, we widened primary walkways and added gentle edge curbs in sloped areas, providing physical security without creating obstacles.

Use musical tones that will not harm sensitive listeners. A local veteran afflicted with a neurological injury from their time in the service shared how certain high-pitched notes can be physically painful. That single conversation changed our approach to musical play elements and pushed us to pri-



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oritize tones and instruments that avoid triggering frequencies.

Adult changing tables are a lifeline. Multiple community members shared that the presence or absence of adult-sized changing tables determines whether they can visit a park at all. In response, the city approved custom restroom buildings with private individual restrooms, each equipped with an adult changing table, a first for Loveland and still rare for parks in the United States.

Listening not only reframed our design assumptions, but also changed the structure of engagement itself. Balancing broad outreach with quieter, more personal conversations ensured that the people most often marginalized in large community meetings could speak candidly about their experiences. As a result, the design grew not from wish lists, but from lived realities. These insights ultimately shaped the park's most defining features.

Sculpted Land Leads to Shared Adventure

A common misconception about welcoming parks is that they must be flat. One of Willow Bend's defining features, and the aspect



IMAGE COURTESY OF DIG STUDIO

families comment on most, is its sculpted topography.

We sculpted two large landforms, scaled like small hills, that frame the playground. These mounds provide a soft sense of containment without fencing and support a wide range of non-prescriptive play: rolling, climbing, exploring or simply observing the activity around them.

Accessible pathways wind gradually to the peaks, while more adventurous routes offer climbing, scrambling or rolling. From the top, a fully accessible bridge connects the two mounds, offering an elevated loop and a shared sense of accomplishment. A child using a mobility device may ascend the hillside path; a friend might climb an adjacent rope or scramble slope. Both arrive together, experiencing the same view and the same excitement.

Because the landforms carry so

much of the play value, they naturally support continuous play circuits, loops of movement and challenge that never force visitors into “accessible” versus “standard” options. Instead, the landscape offers shared opportunities for challenge, independence and joy.

Carved into the slopes are concrete slides of varying lengths and speeds, including one wide enough for an adult and child (or two adults) to ride together. Small platforms at the bottom of each slide allow individuals using mobility devices to transfer safely without blocking the path of travel — a detail requested directly by disability advocates.

Nearby, a roller slide expands the experience for children and adults with cochlear implants by preventing the static discharge common to plastic slides. At ground level, the play-

ground’s synthetic turf was an intentional choice to support ADA access, ease of movement and play safety. Woven into the surface is an abstract willow-branch pattern, whose raised “buds” become stepping stones, balance points, rolling mounds or places to pause. What reads as a graphic from above becomes terrain from a child’s point of view.

Together, these elements turn the landform into a living play system that encourages people to move, challenge themselves, share experiences and return often, each time discovering something new.

Where Play Meets Nature

Although the playground is the heart of the project, Willow Bend Park and Natural Area was designed as a full recreation and environmental experience.

An accessible path leads down from the play area to the East Big Thompson Trail and eventually to an accessible fishing pier. Along the way, small overlooks and seating pockets create natural pauses for visitors who may need rest or support while navigating grade changes.

At the bottom of the hill, a gateway plaza accommodates bus drop-offs and school groups and creates a natural staging space for field trips that link play with nature-based learning.

Throughout the natural area, sculptural seating and tactile materials create sensory-rich moments. A local chainsaw artist, Fay Bratten, affectionately known as “Chainsaw Mama,” carved several large wooden benches, including a beloved mountain lion, which provides both



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IMAGE COURTESY OF DIG STUDIO

seating and imaginative play. This is particularly meaningful for visitors who are visually impaired.

Beyond the play area, the site transitions into restored native grasses and riparian zones. This shift is intentional. Instead of feeling like a playground placed beside nature, Willow Bend feels embedded within it. The landscape becomes part of the play experience rather than simply the backdrop for it.

Where Community Gathers

Access for all also means designing for the rhythms of daily life — the ways families, neighbors, teens and older adults use parks beyond play. As City of Loveland Planning Manager Bryan Harding noted at the grand opening of Willow Bend, “Willow Bend offers something for everybody.”

A thoughtful arrival experience was part of that commitment. The parking area uses a zero-curb condition that allows visitors to move seamlessly from their vehicle into the park without searching for designated ramps. Detectable warning surfaces and edge boundaries create a flush transition that feels intuitive for everyone, including visitors using mobility devices or pushing strollers.

Shaded seating areas, groves of young trees, open lawns and a multi-use sports field offer places for everything from quiet morning walks to youth practice to impromptu meetups. To provide meaningful shade from day one, long before new trees can mature, the design incorporates cost-effective shade sails. Working with the city, we developed a seasonal removal and reinstallation plan that balances comfort, durability and maintenance capacity.

The wide promenade is designed to flex throughout the year,

hosting markets, food trucks and cultural gatherings that help anchor community identity. Nearby, amphitheater-style seat steps create a casual gathering place for performances, school group orientations and everyday spectating. To avoid isolating people using mobility devices, the lowest row includes integrated cutouts so wheelchair users can sit shoulder to shoulder with friends and family rather than being positioned apart.

Together, these elements turn Willow Bend into a community hub where people stay longer than they planned, return more often than expected and participate in a shared rhythm of outdoor life.

Reflections for Other Communities

Every city approaches universal access design differently, and no two parks look the same. But Willow Bend offers a few reflections that may help communities undertaking their own universal design projects.

- **Access for all benefits everyone.** A park that is intuitive, comfortable and accessible serves not only people with disabilities, but also caregivers, grandparents, teens, toddlers and multigenerational families.
- **Topography is a powerful tool.** Shaped landforms can support challenge, containment, identity and shared achievement, often more affordably and with more play value than equipment alone.
- **Engagement must be designed with care.** Smaller and more personal conversations with the disability community surfaced insights we never would have gathered in large public forums alone. Meeting people where they are makes a tangible difference.
- **Partnership makes the work**


possible. This project required alignment across park and recreation staff, engineers, open space specialists, disability advocates council members and maintenance teams. Shared vision was essential.

A Park That Belongs to Everyone

Shortly after opening, Willow Bend was designated a national demonstration site for both play for all and promoting physical activity through PlayCore’s Play On program. QR codes placed around the playground invite visitors to share feedback in real time, giving the city ongoing insight into how the park is used and how future parks might evolve. The project was also recognized with a 2024 APA Colorado Honor Award for Advancing Diversity and Social Change, affirming the broader impact of the city’s vision.

But the true measure of Willow Bend’s impact is found in the everyday moments: a child reaching the top of the bridge at the same time as their sibling, each having taken different paths; a teenager pushing a friend’s wheelchair up the landform to enjoy the view together.

Willow Bend is not defined by one standout feature. It is defined by the accumulation of small and human-centered decisions, each made with care. It is a park designed for belonging.

Universal design is not a specialty — it is a responsibility. Willow Bend shows what becomes possible when that responsibility is embraced from the beginning and when a city commits to creating a place where everyone feels welcome. 

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