

Skateboarders look for a place to roll

BY MELISSA MCKEON MMCKEON@HOLDENLANDMARK.COM

HOLDEN - McKenzie Smith of Holden speaks what many might consider a different language, a language peppered with phrases like "kickflip," "back 180s" and "ollies."

She's speaking English, but it's the language of many teens, perhaps 200 or so in skateboarder Kevin Fors' estimation, who skateboard anywhere they can in town.

Anywhere they won't be chased off, that is.

"There's some places in Holden [to skateboard], but you just get in trouble a lot," Smith says.

Smith has been skateboarding for about a year and a half. She works at McDonald's and spends her money on her skateboard, and on transportation and entrance fees to indoor skateboarding facilities in nearby cities and towns ever since Rutland closed its skatepark last year.

"Now that Rutland's gone, it's just sad," she says.

For Smith at 16, a job, money, transportation and entrance fees are options. For many younger skateboarders, they are not. They depend on finding a place in the neighborhood, asking parents to drive them to a friend's house, or anywhere they might pursue their sport.

"Skateboarding is just a sport just as much as football or cheering," Smith says.

What may be holding back that recognition is an image of skateboarders as troublemakers, the teens say.

"Some kids, sad enough to say, are troublemakers," 15-year-old Jake Nawn says. "One kid will ruin the rep for the others. But that's how it is in any sport. I hear of jocks who get arrested."

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"The kids don't want to get into trouble," says Jake's mom, Marta Nawn. "Certainly the parents don't want them to get into trouble."

The fear of "trouble" is an undercurrent among the younger skateboarders who rely on their own ingenuity - and an empty parking lot and compliant neighbors - to have fun in their chosen activity.

Brenda Devarney says her son, Brian, uses the board for transportation to his friends' homes but quickly shoves it underneath his arm once he reaches his destination. He stays close to home more now, she says.

Skateboarders have always listened for cars or kept their eye out for someone to run them out of a parking lot, but parents and kids agree the atmosphere has worsened since police earlier this month took half a dozen skateboarders to the police station where their parents were asked to come and pick them up.

"They scared all the kids," parent Ed Carroll says.

"It's crazy to villainize the kids when they're just looking for a place to have fun," Susanne Carroll says.

Police Chief George Sherrill says the officers act at their own discretion when the call comes in, and he has received some flak from parents about the event.

But those who talk to Sherrill about the skateboarding issue will find a sympathetic ear.

"I want to see the kids doing something physical," Sherrill says. "I'd rather know where the kids are as well."

Sherrill has encouraged parents who call him to try to get a grassroots effort going to get a place for the kids to skateboard, to address what's become an escalating problem for Holden Police as well as kids and their parents.

As the snow melts and the weather warms, the skateboards come out - and the complaint calls come in.

"We're really caught in the middle," Sherrill says. "We're the buffer."

Sherrill says his staff isn't out patrolling the town looking for skateboarders, but they are responding to the calls from business owners who post their property to prevent the activity, drivers who see kids skateboarding in dangerous places and neighbors complaining about the noise.

"They have every right to [call], and we have a duty to respond," Sherrill says.

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At the Holden Senior Center, a common venue for skateboarders because of its location near two other recreational areas, calls from Senior Center Staff are frequent.

"It's a safety issue for me," Senior Center Director Louise Charbonneau says. "I don't want the kids to be hurt, first and foremost. I don't want the seniors to get close to hurting one of them [with a car]."

The driveway to the Senior Center from Main Street has become something of a pass-through from Main Street, she notes, and there is traffic to the ball field and from DPW vehicles that use a nearby storage shed.

"I see disaster waiting to happen," Charbonneau says.

Many parents, as well are worried about their kids having a safe place to skateboard. Parents who transport them out of town to facilities in nearby communities would rather have them skateboard in town.

Nikki Doolittle is concerned about continually taking her son, Jameson, to an indoor facility in Worcester.

"You don't really know what's going on in there," she says. "If it was more local, I'd be more comfortable with that."

Ed Carroll is concerned about that as well.

"Sometimes we drive [David] into Worcester, but I get nervous when he's in Worcester because there are gangs there," he says.

* * * For many parents, that local aspect just seems logical: young teens are also part of the town officials' constituency, and deserve the attention to their needs, they say.

"To me it's a little annoying that the Recreation Department cares about you until you're eleven and then when you're 21, but in between - nothing," Marta Nawn says.

"If they're going to provide playing fields for kids and tennis courts for adults then they should provide for these kids," says Mario Finocchi, grandfather of a skateboarder.

"It's just time for the town to recognize that it's a sport," says Brenda Devarney.

That recognition seems forthcoming for cycling and rollerblading, but not for skateboarding, she says.

The families interviewed note the common attitude among the public that skateboarding is not a sport, but something akin to what pool halls were to parents of several generations ago - a waste of time at best, a gateway to crime at worst.

Finocchio pegged the image in a recent letter to the editor about his grandson and friends and their need for a skateboard park. "They aren't the Hell's Angels ... I sense there's a real snob attitude towards these kids," Finocchio wrote. "Somehow, what they enjoy doing isn't 'respectable.'"

"It has a negative connotation, which is terrible," Holden Recreation Director Denise Morano says. "There are kids out there who are skateboarders who are absolutely wonderful kids."

Added to all these arguments for Devarney is another goal, an image of a small town that's safe and pleasant for people to raise their families, something many say they're looking for when they move to Holden. She said she enjoys listening on a spring or summer day to the sounds of children playing in the neighborhood, whether they're skateboarding or participating in other sports.

But complaints are lodged by residents on streets where kids might congregate. They're frequently worried about safety, but also take issue with the noise generated by the skateboard maneuvers.

Some business owners, Sherrill says, are worried about damage to property from a sport that requires a jumping-off point and chips steps and curbs. They may raise the issue of vandalism, though that's a fear skateboarding parents say needs to allayed.

"Most of them are very polite," Charbonneau says. "The kids don't mean any harm. They're looking for someplace to go have fun. They're kids."

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Past efforts have been made to provide skateboarders with a home. At a meeting several years ago with police and town officials, parents were told the effort would have to be their own because the town had provided a skateboard park.

The skateboard park at the Dawson Recreation area opened in 1999 with rules, entrance fees, supervision. When Rutland's skateboard park opened a few years later, Holden's facility was largely abandoned, Morano says. Soon there was little justification for keeping the park open, and more demand for the tennis courts.

The effort to re-establish a skate park was ignited recently by parents concerned about the teens taken to the police station, but also by the efforts of Mountview Middle School students to rehab the school's the tennis and basketball courts. There is money in the Recreation Department's coffers, some of the parents say. Morano says there's currently no plan to build a skate park.

While no plan is afoot for a park, Town Manager Brian Bullock leaves the door open. "Never say never," he says.

The town's Master Plan, on the verge of completion, acknowledges the need for activities for the middle school group. In a list of initiatives to help move the plan forward, the Recreation Department is charged with creating a skateboard park.

"It's a community problem and we need a community solution," Sherrill says. But he wonders why nothing is happening.

"Nobody wants to do anything and find a long-term solution," he says.

One hurdle in organizing parents is that skateboarding, unlike such sports as Little League that attract long-term supporters, typically involves families for only a few years. As teens become more independent and find other venues, the issue takes a back seat.

Parents are on the case, however. They're considering fundraising and research.

While officials talk of budgets and parents worry about young teens idle this summer, it's pretty simple for McKenzie Smith.

"Skateboarders need a place to call their home instead of getting kicked out of every place," Smith says.

"Once you get on the board it just feels so good to be free."