

Kershaw County West Playground unveiled

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The newest -- and largest -- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant playground in the Midlands should be open to children Wednesday. Saturday, up to 150 people gathered next to the not-quite-finished venue to hold a ribbon cutting ceremony for the Kershaw County West Playground on what was only the second day of sunny skies in at least a week.

"This is the day we've been waiting for," Lugoff Fire-Rescue Chief Dennis Ray, who served as master of ceremonies, declared to a loud round of cheering and applause.

Camden City Councilwoman Alfred Mae Drakeford, who served on the playground's steering committee, said "there is a sweet, sweet spirit in this place," during her invocation.

As several other speakers did Saturday, Ray said the mastermind who had the vision for the project was Laurey Carpenter, who became the steering committee's co-chair along with Elgin Mayor Melissa Emmons. He said more than 300 donors gave not only money -- raising more than the \$300,000 needed for the playground -- but more than 15,000 collective manhours to the project.

"And they're still giving to (a new) foundation for future projects," Ray said, just before introducing Kershaw County Council Chairman Julian Burns.

Burns said children looking at the playground might see a plane, rocket ship or a pirate ship.

"It doesn't come with instructions or batteries included," Burns said, and then read an excerpt from "Where the Sidewalk Ends" by Shel Silverstein. "It's where your imagination and leadership begin."

Burns, in turn, introduced State Rep. Laurie Slade Funderburk, who grew up in Lugoff. She said her sons were excited to play on the playground, and, perhaps, a little disappointed to have to wait. Funderburk said children are supposed to play.



Martin L. Cahn

More than a dozen cheer (and jump!) to celebrate the ceremonial opening of the Kershaw County West Playground, between Lugoff and Elgin off U.S. 1 on Saturday morning. The playground should be open

to children on Wednesday. Officials, including the playground project's steering committee, led by Laurey Carpenter, spoke before a crowd of approximately 150 people at the nearly completed venue.

"We've forgotten the importance of unfettered, free play," Funderburk said. "Without adults, they still manage to make up rules and stick to them."

She said four things made the playground extra special:

- It was funded and built by the people of Kershaw County, including the more than \$300,000 raised in less than nine months.

- While situated between Elgin and Lugoff, support for the playground came from across the county, transcending the dividing line of the Wateree River.

- It is an ADA, fully accessible playground with the priority to serve all the county's children.

- Proved the citizens of Kershaw County want places for their children to flourish.

"We're showing the rest of the state how to work together," Funderburk said.

She also said the words "go play" -- sometimes a dismissive of parents to their children -- can now mean something different.

"Today, it's a phrase of triumph and celebration," Funderburk said.

Ray then had both Carpenter and Emmons

come up. Emmons praised Carpenter's vision.

"She called me to a meeting one weekend and I thought, 'you know, I've got nothing else to do; I'll go,'" Emmons said. "She sits me down, she tells me this vision and I'm going, 'great, but, you know, I've never seen anything like this in Kershaw County, but I would love to have it because our county is a great place to live.'"

Emmons said she felt Carpenter's idea was wonderful, thinking about her granddaughter, other children and even adults who would love it. And then she asked Carpenter how much it was going to cost. \$300,000, Carpenter told her.

"What?! This is Kershaw County, now. But, from that day forward, she never gave up, she brought together the right people. People who had the same vision, the same passion and we refused to accept 'no,'" Emmons said.

She said when someone has and shares a vision and passion Carpenter had, "you can make anything happen."

"Because of that, our

children and the future children of Kershaw County -- and I'm going to admit it, guys, I'm going to play on this playground -- have a state-of-the-art playground," Emmons said. I am so proud of this community -- individuals, businesses, leaders -- all came together and we took a part in this ... you should all be proud of this project, you are all part of something that will be a lasting item in our county."

Carpenter warned everyone she was likely to get emotional as she stepped up to the microphone.

"It is amazing. I want you to look around at everybody that's here. It is just phenomenal that, yes, I had the vision, but it took all of us," Carpenter said. "It took the whole county, it took all the businesses, all the community leaders. I know you say it's me, but I want you to look around and give everybody a round of applause because our playground's here!"

And, Carpenter said, the playground is just the beginning.

"Kershaw County is the best place to live. You know it, your children know it; this

is just going to be another reason for many more to come, of why Kershaw County is going to be on the map," she said.

Carpenter then laid out what her actual long-term vision is for the county.

"My life-long goal ... is Kershaw County is going to become an All-American City," she announced to another loud round of cheers and applause.

According to Carpenter, an All-American City, is any community, including an entire county, recognized nationwide. Only 10 are named each year by the National Civil League. She said the criteria focus on "collaboration, forward-thinking and looking ahead and creating something for citizens to want to move to Kershaw County."

Carpenter said the playground is just one of any number of projects to lead to be awarded All-American City status.

"Be prepared; we are going to be celebrating in the future. The imagination of other individuals are stepping up to make Kershaw County the best place to live in the United States," Carpenter said.