

Fundraising effort saves San Jose skatepark

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Posted: 01/28/2012 09:23:02 PM PST

Updated: 01/29/2012 06:58:37 AM PST

The concrete bowls of San Jose's Lake Cunningham Regional Skate Park came alive Saturday with frontside carves, magenta hair and the pulsing beat of the Little Medusas in a remarkable reversal of fortune for a skateboarder's paradise that many had feared might be closed by now.

Amid the worst budget crisis in city history, with even police officers worried for their jobs, city leaders last fall said San Jose's gem of a skate park -- California's largest -- would have to either be left as an unstaffed free-for-all, privatized or possibly even padlocked.

But alarmed parents who rallied to save the skate park have raised enough money to keep it staffed through the year. And they celebrated that victory Saturday as the park hosted an all-female skateboarding contest -- the first of its kind in Northern California.

"Isn't this phenomenal?" said Carol Kruger, among the leaders of the Save Our Skatepark group, as her 7- and 8-year-old sons wheeled around the park and watched the girls compete.

The 68,000-square-foot maze of concrete bowls, walls and pipes on White Road near Raging Waters opened in 2008 and cost \$6.4 million to build, mostly paid for with city funds. It boasts the world's largest "cradle," the tallest vertical wall and largest full-pipe feature of any skate park. It draws 40,000 visitors a year.

But in a budget year when the city had to lay off 66 police officers, the skate park last June got only enough funding to keep it open through September.

With the help of Councilwoman Rose Herrera, whose district includes the park, parents scrambled to raise money, sponsorships and publicity for the little-known treasure. By October, they had secured enough cash to keep the park open until February.

Since then, Herrera said Saturday, donations have more than doubled, topping \$30,000. Together with a spike in attendance by perhaps a third, which has boosted revenues, she said, that's enough to keep the skate park open through the end of the year and put it on a path toward self-sufficiency.

"That park's turned the corner," Herrera said as she thanked major donors, including The Health Trust, First 5 Santa Clara County, Valley Medical Center Foundation, and Michael and Kye Heinstein, of Berkeley. She even stepped on a board for a bit -- and managed not to hurt herself.

More contests at the park are planned, including one on St. Patrick's Day.

"It's an example of the city and citizens coming together," said Paul Murphy, a Save Our Skatepark leader whose 12-year-old son skates at the park.

Saturday's Women Skate It Up contest featured 25 women and girls ranging in age from 7 to 39, said Heidi Newton, a skate park instructor who organized the event. Skaters came from as far as Chicago and had plenty of competition from the locals.

Newton said the number of skateboard contests for women and girls is declining, so her goal for Saturday's event was to bring female skateboarders together to increase their professional opportunities.

The skaters were judged on the number, variety, difficulty and stylishness of tricks they performed in one-minute heats as they swooped through the park's mini-bowls and "skull" bowl.

San Jose's Faydra Huff, 14, donned a flowing red wig for her heats, drawing compliments from the emcee for her "nice backside carve grind" in what she later said was only her second contest in just three years of skateboarding.

After their heats, she and Kayla Caballero, who was applauded for her "rippin' corner pockets" and kick turns, zipped off to a much deeper bowl, where they gracefully rode up and down the vertical walls just for kicks.

"It's the most amazing skate park I've ever been to," said Caballero, 14, of Campbell, a Lake Cunningham regular whose father is local skateboarding legend Steve Caballero. "It's fun to see all the girls out here from all over the country and to make new friends."



Kayla Caballero, 14, of Campbell, warms up during a skate competition for girls at Lake Cunningham Skate Park in San Jose Saturday Jan. 28, 2012. (Patrick Tehan/Staff)