

## **GMPT Developing Nature Playgrounds Forum AI Summary – May 19, 2026**

*This article was created by AI summarizing key points discussed. AI makes mistakes, so for full details and context, please refer to the video of the full meeting.*

### **Quick recap**

This meeting was a forum on nature play areas organized by Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails, where three presenters shared their experiences constructing nature play spaces across different demographics and budgets. Gina Hugo from Sherburne County presented their \$275,000 nature play area at Graham's Park, which included five main programming areas with features like willow huts, boulder scrambles, and a contemplative area, funded through DNR Outdoor Recreation Grant. Josh Boss from the City of Elk River shared their \$200,000 project completed in 2020, which featured a water feature, tunnels made from concrete culverts, and free sticks from oak wilt disease trees, with much of the construction done in-house to save costs. Jeff Feese from the City of Rochester discussed their \$200,000 nature play area at Game Haven Park, which included elements like rock scrambles, climbing walls, and a hill slide, along with their incorporation of nature play elements in neighborhood parks. The presenters discussed various challenges including liability concerns, playground safety standards, material sourcing, community engagement, and maintenance requirements, with participants asking questions about design costs, liability issues, and accessibility compliance.

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### **Summary**

#### **Nature Play Areas Forum**

The meeting was a forum on nature play areas organized by Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails, with Gina Hugo from Sherburne County Parks Department facilitating and Josh Boss from Elk River and Jeff Feese from Rochester presenting on nature play construction experiences. Participants introduced themselves including representatives from various counties, state parks, and park departments across Minnesota who are interested in or working on nature-based playground projects. The meeting was in its introductory phase with participants just beginning to share their names and roles, and the formal presentations were about to begin with Josh preparing to share his screen.

### **Elk River Nature Play Area**

Gina presented the construction of Elk River's nature play area, which was built in 2020 with a budget of \$200,000, including a water feature and tunnel structure. The city completed much of the construction in-house, including features like free sticks, logs, and boulders, while also incorporating materials from local sources like MnDOT. Gina highlighted key design modifications, particularly the implementation of a tiered drainage system after initial design issues, and noted that in-house construction saved the city over \$200,000 compared to using contractors for the entire project.

### **Graham's Park Nature Play Area**

Gina presented a nature play area project in Graham's Park, Sherburne County, which cost \$275,000 and was funded through a DNR Outdoor Recreation Grant and local matching funds. The project included five main programming areas: a fairy village, beaver dam climbing pile, boulder scramble, kinesthetic trail loop, and free-form picnic area, with features designed through community engagement and addressing safety concerns. The project team worked with a landscape architect, conducted community surveys, and received support from MCIT regarding recreation immunity concerns.

### **Nature Play Areas Implementation**

The meeting focused on nature play areas in parks, with presenters sharing experiences from Rochester and Benton County. Jeff and Gina from Rochester discussed their Game Haven Park nature play area, which cost around \$200,000 and included features like rock scrambles, hill slides, and water elements. Paul from Benton County shared details about their "nature exploration area" at Bend in the River Regional Park, which was designed to avoid liability concerns by not being called a traditional play area. The discussion covered key aspects of nature play implementation including design costs (15-20% of construction budget), liability considerations, material selection for longevity, and ADA compliance requirements.

### **Collaboration**

- Sherburne County Parks Department (Gina Hugo): Armoring the well-traveled trails on the earth-covered burrow with bonded rubber mulch in the spring.
- Sherburne County Parks Department (Gina Hugo): Refresh the engineered wood fiber surfacing around play features as needed.

- All attendees: Consider utilizing resources from other departments or groups (e.g., MnDOT, forestry) for materials like boulders and logs to reduce costs.
- All attendees: Engage certified playground inspectors in the design phase of nature play areas and for ongoing inspections.
- All attendees: Ensure ADA accessibility is considered in the design and construction of nature play areas.