



Virginia Association of Counties ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2025.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).


PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Wythe County
Program Title: Play Wythe Ager Park
Program Category: Parks and Recreation

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Title: County Administrator
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VACo Achievement Awards Program Submission

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Program Overview

For more than 30 years, Ager Park has served as a community gathering space for residents of Wythe and the surrounding counties. With the 2024 completion of its multi-year inclusive playground project, *Play Wythe Ager Park*, Wythe County has taken a big step forward in creating a more welcoming and developmentally enriching space for all children and their families, regardless of ability.

The new Ager Park Playground was designed with inclusivity at its core. The final layout integrates a wide array of features aimed at supporting users of all abilities, informed by national best practices and standards such as the Seven Principles of Inclusive Play. The playground includes ADA-compliant



swings, ground-level play components, musical and sensory elements, and tactile surface variations that were all thoughtfully planned to offer meaningful experiences for every visitor.

Ager Park's new playground features a nature theme that reflects Wythe County's mountain setting. Uneven steps,

various surface textures, and collaborative play elements such as musical play zones encourage cooperation, balance, and sensory exploration. These features are intentionally incorporated to support adaptive physical coordination and cognitive development. Evidence-based best practices were incorporated throughout the design process to encourage outdoor activity, social interaction, and imaginative play.

Serving children ages 2 through 12, the playground is divided into two age-appropriate zones: one geared towards early childhood (ages 2-8) and one for older youth (ages 8-12). Both areas offer traditional and innovative play experiences. The inclusion of ramps, wide platforms, handholds, and sensory activities throughout ensures that children with diverse needs can engage.

This playground fills a critical gap in Wythe County, where most public playgrounds are located on elementary school grounds and are not open year-round. Inclusive play areas are still rare in rural communities. Beyond serving individual children and families, the project reinforces Wythe County's commitment to free and accessible outdoor recreation. This playground was built to meet evolving community needs. It will benefit residents for generations, ensuring that every child, regardless of age, background, or ability, has the opportunity to play, learn, and grow.

The Challenge

For nearly three decades, the original Ager Park playground served as a vital and beloved outlet for outdoor play and family time in Wythe County. But like many aging public assets, the structure had begun to show its years. Built primarily of wood in 1994, the equipment steadily declined despite frequent



repairs and routine upkeep. Years of exposure to the elements left critical components splintered, rotting, and unsafe, with several features removed entirely due to hazard concerns.

Compounding the issue was the region's broader shortage of accessible recreational facilities. In

Wythe County, most playgrounds are located on school grounds and are not open to the public outside school hours. Of those, none offer the kind of inclusive, adaptive design needed to welcome children of all abilities.

Innovation

Rather than take a basic replacement approach, Wythe County chose to reimagine what a public playground could and should be with longevity in mind. Wythe County needed equipment better suited to stand the test of time for Wythe County children. From the beginning, County staff embraced a forward-thinking vision rooted in best practices, research-based design, and child development principles. The result is a vibrant, multi-sensory, nature-themed playground that reflects Wythe's mountain setting while serving a much broader range of abilities and needs.

Every element of the *Play Wythe Ager Park* design was chosen with care. Uneven surfaces and tactile textures invite children to explore with their hands and feet. Musical instruments promote cognitive



stimulation and social collaboration. Wide ramps, low platforms, and ground-level features ensure that children who use mobility devices can participate fully. The space is divided into age-appropriate zones to support safe, developmentally appropriate play for children ages 2 to 12. The final design is accessible,

welcoming, imaginative, and enriching for all who enter.

This level of inclusive design is still rare in rural communities. Wythe County's commitment to exceeding accessibility standards and embedding adaptive, research-informed play principles represents a first in the area resource for families in Wythe that can be an example to other communities.

Collaboration

The revitalization of Ager Park was a collaborative effort that brought together multiple County departments, public and private partners, and community-minded leadership. The Wythe County Parks and Recreation Department led the charge, with key support from the Departments of Buildings and Grounds and Engineering. The entire demolition of the old playground and the preparation of the site,

including grading, erosion control, and stormwater mitigation, were completed in-house, demonstrating a hands-on commitment from the county.



Careful planning and strong local investment made every dollar count. County staff identified \$280,000 from the federal Local Assistance and Tribal Consistency Fund that was available for the project. The Wythe-Bland Foundation, a longstanding partner in health and wellness efforts in the region, contributed an additional \$188,00 to the two-phased project. The rest of the nearly \$700,000 project was funded by Wythe County and a grassroots

community fundraising effort led by Parks and Recreation staff. The County selected Bliss Products through a competitive procurement process to provide and install the new equipment that aligned with the vision for the updated playground. The original wooden structure was a labor of community love.

Wythe County staff believed that the new playground should be as well.

This team-driven approach not only stretched dollars further but ensured that the final product would reflect local values and meet long-term community needs.

Implementation

Planning for the *Play Wythe Ager Park* project began in 2022 with site assessments, community input, and professional design consultations focused on inclusive play. A competitive RFP process led to the selection of Bliss Products, known for their commitment to accessible, nature-themed playground solutions that fit the bill for Wythe County's needs.

Construction of Phase One began in Summer 2023. The focus of this phase was on equipment tailored to children ages 8 to 12, including a range of climbing structures, cooperative play zones, musical instruments, sensory panels, and ADA-compliant swings and platforms. Site preparation was led by County staff.

Phase Two wrapped in August 2024 and completed the 2–8-year-old play zone. Additional site upgrades, including resurfacing courts and trails, are planned as part of the County’s capital improvement schedule moving forward.

In preserving the spirit of the original park, County staff carefully salvaged the honorary fence pickets from the 1994 playground.

The pickets have been restored and incorporated into an art



installation as a tribute to the community members whose early support laid the foundation for today’s success. Similarly, donors to the new construction are identified throughout the playground with commemorative woodland creature plaques crafted by Engineering and Drafting students at Wythe County Technology Center.

Results

The revitalized Ager Park has already proven to be a resounding success. With assistance from the Wythe County Sheriff’s Office, traffic counters installed at the park recorded more than 3,500 vehicle visits per month during peak seasons. Family groups, daycare vans, and recreational league participants fill the park throughout the week. Even in the parks’ off season, residents continue to use the space in colder months, a testament to the playground’s popularity and year-round appeal.

More importantly, the new playground addresses serious regional health and accessibility concerns. According to the Virginia Department of Health, more than 34 percent of adults in Wythe and Bland counties are affected by obesity. Nearly 30 percent of Wythe residents report physical inactivity, and disability rates exceed both state and national averages. Ager Park now offers a local solution to these challenges, encouraging movement, imagination, and social interaction in a safe and inviting environment.

The impact on local families with children who have disabilities is especially profound. With more than 650 students identified as having physical or developmental challenges in Wythe County Public Schools alone, the need for inclusive spaces was



not abstract; it was immediate. Now, these children have a free, centrally located place to play without barriers, alongside their peers, in a setting designed with them in mind.

Executive Summary

In 2024, Wythe County celebrated a major milestone in community investment with the completion of the two-phase project, *Play Wythe Ager Park* inclusive playground. Driven by community needs and powered by County led vision, the *Play Wythe Ager Park* initiative replaced a worn and weathered wooden playground with a vibrant, engaging environment where children of all ages and abilities can play and explore. Located in Wytheville and long treasured by residents of the area, Ager Park's playground was in urgent need of replacement after three decades of service. With strong interdepartmental leadership and carefully coordinated funding, County staff delivered a vibrant new play space that welcomes all children, regardless of ability.

The redesigned playground includes ramps, ADA swings, musical elements, tactile surfaces, and nature-themed features that support physical coordination, imagination, and social development. Phase One focused on play equipment for older children, while Phase Two completed the area for younger users.

Funded by \$280,000 in federal assistance and \$188,000 in grant dollars from the Wythe-Bland Foundation, significant local investment, and executed with in-house expertise, the project has already seen substantial use and overwhelmingly positive community feedback. *Play Wythe Ager Park* now serves as a model for inclusive, rural recreation and demonstrates Wythe County's long-term commitment to health, equity, and joyful play for all.