

Vineland celebrates groundbreaking for city's first special needs park

Story by Joseph P. Smith, Cherry Hill Courier-Post
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VINELAND — Construction predictions are risky, but the playground for children with special needs that city officials have strained for years to deliver may be ready for its debut in just a few months, according to one of its designers.

Under grey skies, symbolic shovels of dirt were tossed at the groundbreaking ceremony April 13 for the Vineland playground. The special needs, or “all-inclusive,” park is joining a growing statewide roster of similar parks seeded with support and funding under [New Jersey’s Jake’s Law](#).

Mayor Anthony Fanucci committed the city to the project more than five years ago, long before items such as land access and state funding were locked down. The New Jersey Green Acres Program eventually came through with approximately \$5.3 million, more than imagined here at the outset.

“When completed, this park will serve not only Vineland residents, but families across Cumberland County and beyond,” Fanucci said at the ceremony Monday. “More importantly, it will stand as a lasting symbol of our values, accessibility, and inclusion in our community.”

“Today’s ground-breaking is not just the start of construction, it is the beginning of something meaningful for generations to come.”

With \$400,000 in municipal money set aside for the project as well, the facility is designed to provide recreation and relaxation opportunities to children and also adults with any manner of disability.

James Verna, an engineer on the project for the firm Pennoni, said the project has an "enormous scale." The building site is behind some of the soccer fields at the Joseph E. Romano Sports Complex off Maple Avenue.

"It's a great addition, not just to Vineland and to the county, but to South Jersey and the entire state," Verna said. "We have a beautiful sensory garden that's going in with it. A splash park as well as all the playground equipment."



Vineland officials and guests pick up shovels at Monday's groundbreaking ceremony for the city's first park designed for kids with special needs. The park is to be built at the Joseph Romano Sports Complex off Maple Avenue. April 13, 2026. ©Joseph P. Smith

According to city officials, the playground will have eight unique activity areas. Seven of those areas are to have a range of specialized equipment. For example, wheelchair accessibility is provided.

The sensory garden is meant to those with some level of autism as a space where they can interact in a calming environment. Canopies are included over most areas to allow their use all year.

Verna said the project "lucked out" with the selection of the construction contractor, Command Co. Inc. of Egg Harbor City.

That award gives him hope that the grand opening can be held in a few months, he added.

State Sen. Michael Testa Jr., R-Cumberland, opened the ceremony by calling the day the "beginning of something truly special and historic."

"As the first of its kind in the area, it will give kids of all abilities a safe, welcoming place to play, build friendships, and enjoy being a kid," Testa said. "The real impact of today will be seen in the smiles, friendships, and memories created for many, many years to come."

Joe Smith is a N.E. Philly native transplanted to South Jersey almost four decades ago, concentrating on housing, politics, real estate, business, and development. He is a former editor and current senior staff writer for The Daily Journal in Vineland, Courier-Post in Cherry Hill, and the Burlington County Times.