

## Marion officials hope Ogburn, Steele parks foster community gatherings

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Basketball courts have been returned to Steele Park.

Stephanie Porter-Nichols/Smyth County News & Messenger

An avid pickleball player, Marvin Leslie appeared before the Marion Town Council this fall to thank them for improvements to Ogburn Park.

In addition to pickleball courts, the Chatham Hill Road area park also features a new walking path and an upgraded basketball court.

Completed earlier this year, a Smyth County Community Foundation grant of \$65,750 helped make the upgrades possible.

Foundation officials noted that the organization's focus is on improving health, wellness and education opportunities for citizens. "What better way to do so," said Executive Director Lynda Helton, than through a neighborhood park open and free to people of all ages and abilities.

Residents of another Marion neighborhood knew the power of parks and wanted theirs restored.

In 2023, resident Greg Rashad asked the council to turn its attention to the park. He said Steele Park, which is on Iron Street across from the former Carnegie School, had been neglected over the years.

In the late 1990s, with vagrancy and vandalism cited as problems, the park was transformed into an area for younger children with its basketball court removed.

With an \$88,000 Smyth County Community Foundation grant in hand, town officials began exploring the possibilities.

To facilitate the improvements, early this year, the Smyth County Board of Supervisors transferred the deed for the park, which had been owned by the School Board, to the town.

At that time, Ken Heath, Marion's community and economic development director, told the council, "We want the neighborhood to be involved."

In March, community meetings were launched to get residents' input on plans for the park.

Much of the work is completed with the exception of seeding and landscaping that will need to be accomplished in the spring.

Heath, who's coordinated Steele Park's rehab and possesses fond memories of its past, said recently, "I'm excited to see what's yet to come! The fact that this is truly community led, with neighbors designing what they wanted, makes this so special. In my humble opinion, it's the way it should work - community led visions coming to reality!"

“As a kid,” Heath said, “I remember my grandfather restocking the concession stand at the Carnegie pool and the Town Rec building, both fixtures for generations of my schoolmates, and both now long gone. Every time we lose a neighborhood asset, we lose a piece of our community soul.”

Earlier this year, Heath reflected, “When it’s completed, I hope it’s not just a playground, but a gathering spot for everyone to come together for recreation and celebrations for generations to come.”