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Photo by Andy Manis

The Barrington Park District plans to build a treehouse accessible to wheelchair users, similar to this one at Bethesda Lutheran Home in Watertown, Wis.

Treehouse design branches out

The Barrington Park District and a Vermont group will make childhood haven wheelchair accessible



Tribune photo by George Thompson

Dan Feeney (from left), Bill Allen and D.J. Newport are involved in the treehouse project, which will cost about \$400,000.

By **M. Daniel Gibbard**
Tribune staff reporter

There is magic in a treehouse, the kind that lets a child climb a rope ladder, clamber through a trapdoor and suddenly be light-years away from the world stuck down on the ground.

Most children in wheelchairs wouldn't know, but thanks to the lofty goals of a group of motivated dreamers from Vermont and at least one northern suburb, that could soon change.

In the first project of its kind in Illinois, Barrington recently finalized plans for a tri-level treehouse complex accessible to wheelchairs via long ramps that would wind their way through at least six trees. The estimated cost: \$400,000.

"We are not going to hold any punches with this," said Brian Shahinian, executive director of the Northern Illinois

Special Recreation Association. "We feel it's such a valuable asset, not only to children with and children without disabilities, but to the village of Barrington. We want to make sure this is not just a glorified playground."

Shahinian's group, which provides recreational activities for the disabled, is working with the Barrington Park District and Forever Young Treehouses, a non-profit organization in Burlington, Vt., that helps communities design, build and raise funds for the houses.

Forever Young got its start in 1999 when Bill Allen, a treehouse buff, and a doctor specializing in orthopedics and rehabilitation were both on the board of the Make-A-Wish Foundation and hit on the idea of making a treehouse accessible to children who use wheelchairs.

The group wants to put a treehouse in

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WHEELCHAIR: Park District seeks donors for treehouse

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every state by 2008; Illinois would be the eighth.

"A treehouse is truly an ethereal experience. It's something you feel physically and spiritually at the same time," Allen said. "You're up there, and it's fun, and something just happens."

The only Forever Young treehouse in the Midwest opened in August at Bethesda Lutheran Home in Watertown, Wis., halfway between Madison and Milwaukee.

Besides Barrington, Riverwoods is considering a treehouse proposal, and the Deerfield Park District is intrigued by the idea, said Director Linda Gryziecki.

One of Forever Young's signature treehouses is at Paul Newman's Hole in the Wall Gang Camp for children with cancer and other life-threatening illnesses in Ashford, Conn. The elaborate complex uses 23 trees and 11 platforms on the way to a 600-square-foot treehouse 20 feet in the air. More than 100 yards of ramps is needed to reach the top.

Teresa Jennings, director of the Barrington Park District, said her agency envisions a



Tribune photo by George Thompson

The Barrington Park District hopes to start construction on a wheelchair accessible treehouse in summer.

similar setup.

"We call it the pathway to the stars," she said.

Barrington's treehouse would overlook Cuba Marsh, near U.S. Highway 14 and Lake Zurich Road. Unlike some of Forever Young's projects, Barrington's would be geared toward everyone: disabled and able-bodied, young and old, Jennings said.

The 575-square-foot house would be a destination for field trips, sleepovers and birthday parties, or even a romantic place for a wedding, she said. Designed with safety in mind, the ramps would have such a gradual slope that children using wheelchairs could negotiate them without fear of rolling down, said D.J. Newport, NISRA's day camp and leisure education coordinator.

The plans are advanced, considering that Newport contacted Forever Young only in August after seeing a magazine story about the group. The Barrington Park District, a member of the special-recreation association, already wanted to build a new park and embraced the idea of putting a treehouse there. By fall, tentative plans were in place.

Forever Young sent arborists to evaluate the site and determine how to incorporate the trees into the design without harming them. The houses, built on and around the tree branches, are not heated or cooled to prevent a temperature imbalance, Allen said.

Final renderings were delivered to Barrington last week, Newport said.

The last step is to line up donors, and Jennings and Shahinian would like to land a corporate sponsor; the treehouse at Newman's camp is sponsored by and named after Discover Financial Services.

If all goes well, construction could begin in late summer, Shahinian said.

While making a treehouse accessible to someone in a wheelchair may seem fanciful, activists for the disabled say

Chicago-based group. "When you're excluded, it can be painful. So, when you're included, when you're thought of and finally what we're trying to accomplish in the world [is achieved], it's a beautiful thing."

Indeed, part of the point of the Barrington project is to bring all children together.

"When our treehouse task force met to plan the design, that was one of our main priorities, an environment that promotes interaction of children with and without disabilities," Shahinian said.

Illinois is a natural place for accessible treehouses because of its long commitment to special recreation, said John McGovern, head of the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association, which includes Deerfield and Riverwoods.

"Illinois is head and shoulders above every other state in providing recreation for peo-

'A treehouse is truly an ethereal experience. It's something you feel physically and spiritually at the same time.'

Bill Allen, of Forever Young Treehouses

ple with disabilities," he said. "We've recognized [the need] since 1970, and some places are only getting around to it now."

Barrington resident Stacy Sekinger, whose son Patrick, 15, is a NISRA client, said the treehouse idea "is really cool."

Her son, who has cerebral palsy and epilepsy, can walk but not climb, and many of his friends are in wheelchairs or use walkers, Sekinger said.

In general, "this is a world that is not opened up to these kids," she said. "It's not designed for them, it's not safe for them."

