

Memo

To: Village President and Board of Trustees, Village of Oak Park
Park Board President and Board of Park Commissioners, Park District of Oak Park

From: Park District Citizen Committee

Date: 12/10/2004

Re: Park District of Oak Park Comprehensive Master Plan

PURPOSE

To provide background information, a summary, and issues related to the Oak Park Park and Recreation Comprehensive Master Plan.

BACKGROUND

- 1) **Parks Infrastructure Committee Report, November 2002.** The Board of Park Commissioners initiated the Parks Infrastructure Committee to inventory and assess the condition of the Park District's infrastructure and make recommendations on immediate and long-range capital planning. After 14 months of observation and analysis, the citizen committee, composed of volunteers from the local community, recommended a Capital Improvement Plan.
 - a) The Committee reached three major findings:
 - i) The lack of financial resources has created a serious deferred maintenance problem. Building systems are continuing to deteriorate, grounds are not properly maintained, vehicles are not being replaced, and computer systems are not upgraded to take advantage of new technology.
 - ii) Relationships between the Park District, Village, and school districts are critical.
 - iii) Existing financial resources are not nearly enough to pay for all the needed improvements. The Park District currently does not have the funds necessary to address life safety work items.
 - b) Four major recommendations were highlighted in the Committee's final report:
 - i) A major planning effort, to include a Comprehensive Plan, Site Master Plans, and a Capital Improvement Program needs to be made to ensure that limited financial resources are used effectively. As a community, some major decisions need to be made about the future of the Community Centers and large special facilities like Cheney Mansion and Pleasant Home.
 - ii) It is estimated that the 10-year capital improvement plan will cost over \$13 million. The Park District should prepare financial plans that include cost recovery policies, financial models, life cycle costs, and a reserve study.
 - iii) The Park District should appoint a Citizen Advisory Committee to develop a comprehensive plan for the Park District for the future.
 - iv) A focus on good design and preserving the Jens Jensen designs is essential to the quality of life in Oak Park.
- 2) **Comprehensive Plan Process.**
 - a) **The Comprehensive Planning Process began in June 2003** when a letter of understanding was signed between the Park District of Oak Park and the Village of Oak Park to jointly complete this project.
 - b) **Leisure Vision, Inc. was selected as the vendor to develop the Comprehensive Plan for parks and recreation in Oak Park. Leisure Vision's credentials included:**
 - i) Leisure Vision is one of the premier market research and consulting firms in the United States, focused on conducting long range master plans, strategic plans, feasibility studies, and management studies for parks and recreation agencies and the leisure industry.
 - ii) Clients have included more than 200 cities, park districts, universities, and counties, and the national park service as well as other providers in 38 states across the country.
 - iii) Leisure Vision has a national data base of over 50,000 survey results which provide an unequalled market research tool for comparing and analyzing survey results to dozens of other communities across the country.
 - iv) Leisure Vision partnered with the firms of CYLA Design Associates of Oak Park, IL; Gilmore Franzen Architects, Inc of Oak Park, IL; Ballard*King and Associates; and GreenPlay, LLC.
 - c) **Project Scope.** Work projects for the Comprehensive Planning process included:
 - i) **Parks and Recreation Facilities Inventory.** A review of existing park sites for strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, a review and consideration of land resources, and an identification of possible future park redevelopment and land acquisition opportunities.

- ii) **Community Needs Assessment Survey.** A Community Attitude and Interest Survey was developed by the Park District Citizen Committee in conjunction with Leisure Vision, and conducted during the months of January and February, 2004. The focus of the survey was to survey existing attitudes, utilization rates, perceived needs, and to establish priorities for the future development of parks and recreation facilities, programs and services within the community.
 - iii) **Benchmarking Comparison.** A Benchmarking Survey of comparable communities to compare Oak Park's operating revenues, numbers, sizes and types of parks was sent to 22 benchmark communities. Leisure Vision received responses from 13 communities. The range of questions included the number and types of parks and trails, number and types of indoor/outdoor facilities, partnerships, and operating and capital budgets.
 - iv) **Review of Neighborhood Based Community Centers.** A comprehensive review was conducted on the neighborhood-based community center model as related to effectiveness and efficiency of meeting community needs.
 - v) **Benchmarking Comparison of Similar Communities (Governance).** An identification of governance structures and best practices for similar communities was developed.
- 3) **Park District Citizen (PDCC) Committee.**
- a) **Applications were submitted by 35 Oak Park residents for the Park District Citizen Committee (PDCC).** The Village of Oak Park and the Park District of Oak Park jointly appointed 11 members and 2 alternates including Doug Varn (Chair), Patience R. Nelson, (Vice-Chair), Martin J. Bracco, Jessica Bullock, Laura E. Kaufman, Susan Kurtenbach, Gail R. Moran, John Mullins, Rickey Sain Sr., David Stannard, Kathy Stohr, Katie Kelly (Alternate) and Mary Kay O'Grady (Alternate). Members of the PDCC have diverse backgrounds and work experiences and are representative of the geographic areas of Oak Park.
 - b) **September 9, 2003 Park District Citizen Committee (PDCC) Orientation Meeting.** The responsibilities of the PDCC were identified as: attendance at public forums and the Strategic Directions Workshop, providing input into the development of the Community Survey, assisting staff in identifying benchmark organizations for operational and governance purposes, providing input into development of benchmarking survey, reviewing draft report with staff and consultants, attending public meetings to present draft report, attending the Consensus Workshop, and assisting with the development of a Unifying Vision.
 - c) **Initial Information Gathering.**
 - i) **Leisure Vision Information Gathering Visit, September 9-11.** Leisure Vision interviewed 31 community and business leaders, facilitated 7 focus groups made of special interest and user groups, and held 2 community public forums.
 - ii) **Strategic Directions Workshop, October 9, 2003.** The working meeting highlighted the public input sessions and affirmed key issues to be addressed in the Comprehensive Plan. The meeting, facilitated by consultants from Leisure Vision, included the Park District of Oak Park Board of Park Commissioners, the Village of Oak Park Board of Trustees, and the Park District Citizen Committee. Key issues that were identified included: funding, governance, historic properties, maintenance of facilities, neighborhood centers, partnerships, service needs and priorities, and the need for a unified approach/intent.
 - iii) **Park Tour, October 22, 2003.** A tour of the park facilities was conducted for the members of the Park District Citizen Committee.
 - d) **Park District Citizen Subcommittees.**
 - i) **Attitude & Interest Survey.**
 - (1) **Process.** The PDCC Survey Subcommittee provided a great deal of direction and feedback to Leisure Vision as the survey was designed. Dick Barrett, a UIC Professor and an authority on demographics, attended a PDCC Meeting to provide guidance. Numerous survey drafts were composed before the final Community Attitude and Interest Survey was mailed to approximately 3,500 households in early January 2004 as part of the development of the Comprehensive Plan. Residents were asked to share their views and desires for the community's parks and recreation facilities and services which will be the foundation for setting priorities and determining future programs and capital needs for the Park District. The goal was to receive at least 800 responses.
 - ii) **Benchmarking.**
 - (1) **Process.** The role of the Subcommittee was to assist Leisure Vision in developing a list of benchmark communities as part of the Comprehensive Plan. The Subcommittee included Gail Moran, Jessica Bullock, Doug Varn, and Gary Balling. Rick Kuner served as a technical advisor. Originally, 67 potential benchmark communities were identified. The Benchmarking Subcommittee developed a list of criteria to evaluate the communities. The first criterion established was that the communities be located in the Midwest. The Subcommittee decided on five variables to use in the benchmark comparison. These variables included: population, percent renters, percent non-white, median household income, and miles to the nearest large city. All data came from the U.S. Census for 2000, with the exception of miles to the nearest large city which was compiled by Gail Moran. The standard deviation and range for each variable was compiled. The communities were then sorted by each variable. A list including the number of times

that a community appeared more than ten away from Oak Park (either higher or lower) was then deleted. Communities that appeared three or more times on the list were deleted. The final list included the following 17 communities: Berwyn, IL; Cleveland Heights, OH; Evanston, IL; Shaker Heights, IL; Skokie, IL; Brooklyn Park, MN; Cicero, IL; Des Plaines, IL; Forest Park, IL; Hoffman Estates, IL; Kettering, OH; Mt. Prospect, IL; Palatine, IL; Royal Oak, MI; University City, MO; Wauwatosa, WI; and Westmont, IL. Leisure Vision added five additional communities to the Benchmarking Subcommittee's list. These communities were added because of Leisure Vision's experience with these communities. A Benchmarking Survey, five pages in length and containing 21 questions, was then sent out to the 22 communities. Leisure Vision received responses from 13 communities. The range of questions included the number and types of parks and trails, number and types of indoor/outdoor facilities, partnerships, and operating and capital budgets.

- (2) **Results.** Approximately 67% of the benchmark communities have long-range capital improvement plans. The average length of the program was 5 years. The average annual spending on capital was \$1,390,000. The Park District of Oak Park currently does not have a long-range capital improvement plan. Oak Park ranks 8th out of the 13 park systems in operating budget. In other words, Oak Park is at the lower end of the benchmarking communities in terms of its operating budget. Oak Park ranks 9th out of 11 systems in tax revenues. In other words, Oak Park is close to the bottom of the benchmarking communities in terms of its revenues. Oak Park has more community centers than the average benchmark community. However, the benchmark communities have more community/specialty centers. In addition, Oak Park's community centers/field houses are smaller and have less program space than the benchmark communities. Oak Park has smaller parks and less acreage than the benchmark communities. The average community had 7.5 acres per 1,000 population. Oak Park has 2.92 acres per 1,000 population. There were also significantly fewer miles of trails in Oak Park, as compared to the benchmark communities. The Benchmark findings validate the need for a capital improvement plan. The survey also highlights the need to increase the operating budget and revenue sources for the Park District of Oak Park. The number/size of indoor and outdoor facilities should also be taken into account when developing a proposed action plan for the Park District.

iii) **Indoor Spaces.**

Process: An Indoor Spaces Subcommittee was formed as a result of the Parks and Recreation Citizens Survey which identified several unmet needs with regard to indoor spaces. The subcommittee members, including Chair Marty Bracco, Susan Kurtenbach, John Mullins, Susan Kurtenbach, Gail Moran and Kurt Mackey were charged with conducting an investigation and reporting on those unmet needs, including an examination of the indoor spaces inventory, the utilization rates of those spaces, and exploration of options to address the unmet needs.

- (1) **Fitness and Exercise Spaces and Gymnasiums:** The current facilities of the Park District do not provide sufficient or adequate space. Additional space for indoor fitness is needed. The Park District can put to use its community centers space, but that space will not adequately address the future public demand for indoor programming and, as shown by the survey results, does not adequately meet those demands at present. There appears to be room for partnerships or collaboration with the YMCA, and possible increased collaboration with OPRFHS in regard to facilities.
- (2) **Indoor Swimming Facilities:** Based upon survey, research, and anecdotal evidence, there is need in Oak Park for some type of an indoor swimming facility. Aquatic programs for seniors are currently very popular. An indoor facility can provide expanded programming, opportunity for group rentals and can serve as a way to draw users from outside of Oak Park. Partnerships with the YMCA (perhaps using the pool at Ridgeland Common) or Triton College are possibilities.
- (3) **Indoor Hockey:** Currently the rink is not a standard size for professional skating competition and there is a shortened skating season (September – March). This facility was not built for warm weather. Through discussions with rink users, it was concluded that an **ideal** (but not currently feasible) situation would be to have 2 rinks – one standard size rink for ice skating and hockey and a small rink for 3 on 3 tournaments, lessons, etc.,. A number of other options were also discussed.
- (4) **Fine Arts and the Oak Park Conservatory:** A dialogue between the Park District and community theater and arts programs needs to be initiated. The Oak Park Conservatory, home to 30,000 visitors annually, receives significant support from the Friends of the Oak Park Conservatory. Currently the Conservatory is in need of numerous maintenance repairs which are costly due to this facility's historical significance.
- (5) **Gymnastics:** The survey disclosed there is a desire and need for gymnastics classes. Many non-residents utilize the current program. There is a waiting list of at least 150 people for each term. The Madison Street Business District was suggested as a possible sponsor to expand the program. There have been some discussions about the possibility of acquiring additional space.

- iv.) **Governance.** A significant aspect of the master planning process is to evaluate and discuss the appropriate system of governance to effectuate the desired future of the community for its parks and recreation system. The Leisure Vision consultant team developed four alternative models of governance specific to Oak Park which included Model 1) Enhanced partnering using the current Oak Park model; 2) Independent Park District including ownership of community centers and surrounding grounds with enhanced partnering relationships with community providers; Model 3) Independent Park District with ownership and operation of community centers by the Village of Oak Park with partnering relationships with community provider; Model 4) Village operated parks and recreation system. The subcommittee on governance thoroughly discussed the proposed 15 "Measures of Excellence in a Park System" as developed by the Trust for Public Lands for measuring the effectiveness of a governance system provided by Leisure Vision. The subcommittee used the following nine factors (which incorporated all 15 elements proposed, but grouped some together under a broader category) to test the alternative governance models. The factors included 1) Vision; 2) Planning & Community Input; 3) Sufficient Assets; 4) Service Delivery; 5) Citizen Involvement; 6) Community Benefits; 7) Partnering; 8) Sustainability; 9) Access to Decision Makers;

Each of the above nine evaluative factors were then assigned a weight of importance. On a 1 to 5 scale of importance, with 5 being most important and 1 least, the evaluative factors of Vision, Planning & Community Input, Service Delivery, Citizen Involvement, and Sustainability were assigned weights of 5. Sufficient Assets, Partnering and Access to Decision Makers were assigned a weighting value of 4 and Community Benefits was assigned a weight of 3.

DISCUSSION

- 1) **Governance & Best Practices.** The Park District Citizen Committee has concluded that the existing arrangement by which the Park District of Oak Park and the Village of Oak Park have shared roles in the management of the neighborhood community centers and the programs associated with each, is inefficient and can lead to conflicting policies and positions. Likewise, the PDCC concluded that the needs of the Oak Park community can best be met through a governance structure that aligns in a single organization the community-wide parks and recreation mission with all of the responsibilities, resources, and accountability. It is the strong sense of the Park District Citizen Committee that the Park District model could do it best. Active citizen involvement is one of the defining characteristics of Oak Park and access to decision-makers is highly valued and expected. Under the Park District model, the Board of Park Commissioners is directly accountable to the citizens and has a single focus: parks and recreation. This singular focus ensures that parks and recreation issues will always be the first priority. This further encourages citizen involvement and leadership, since there is direct access to decision-makers. While consolidation as a department of the Village could work, it necessarily involves additional organizational layers between citizens and decision-makers, and the competing priorities of other Village functions.
- 2) **Capital Plan.**
 - a) **Need for a Plan.** Approximately 67% of the benchmark communities have long-range capital improvement plans. The average length of the program is 5 years. The average annual spending on capital is \$1,390,000. The Park District of Oak Park currently does not have a long-range capital improvement plan. The Benchmark findings validate the need for a capital improvement plan. The Benchmarking Survey also highlights the need to increase the operating budget and revenue sources for the Park District of Oak Park. The number/size of indoor and outdoor facilities should also be taken into account when developing a proposed action plan for the Park District.
 - b) **Interior Space Needs Identified.**
 - i) **Community/Specialty Centers.** Oak Park has more community centers than the average benchmark community. However, the benchmark communities have more community/specialty centers. In addition, Oak Park's community centers/field houses are smaller and have less program space than the benchmark communities. Approximately 41% of the Community Survey respondents indicated that they did not use the neighborhood centers. In addition, 36% only used them for the restrooms/drinking fountains. Forty-eight percent of Community Survey respondents indicated being either very supportive or somewhat supportive of converting some of the seven neighborhood centers into specialty centers. Forty-two percent of respondents indicated being either very supportive or somewhat supportive of cutting back on operating hours at the centers.
 - ii) **Potential Improvements to Indoor Spaces.**
 - (1) **Existing Indoor Spaces.**
 - a) **Aerobics/Fitness Spaces.** Indoor exercise and fitness facilities were identified as a need by 54% of the Community Survey respondents. The highest percentage of respondent households, at 48%, indicated that it would use expanded aerobic/fitness space.

- (b) **Ridgeland Commons.** One of the highest very supportive ratings for investing tax dollars for improvements in the Community Survey was \$800,000 to improve Ridgeland Commons (42%). The Indoor Spaces Subcommittee conducted an evaluation of Ridgeland Common, in conjunction with Leisure Vision/Ballard*King. The Subcommittee's perspective is that Ridgeland Common is in need of major repairs.
 - (2) **New Indoor Spaces.** An indoor running/walking track (54%) is the potential indoor programming space that the highest percentage of respondent households would use if developed.
 - c) **Outdoor Spaces/Standards.**
 - i) **Overall Park Acreage/Identified Needs.** Oak Park has smaller parks and less acreage than the benchmark communities. The average community had 7.5 acres per 1,000 population. Oak Park has 2.92 acres per 1,000 population. The need for small neighborhood parks received the highest level of response at 75% of Community Survey respondents. Respondents also indicated that they would allocate \$29 out of every \$100 to the improvements/maintenance of existing parks, playgrounds, and outdoor swimming pools.
 - ii) **Trails.** There were significantly fewer miles of trails in Oak Park, as compared to the benchmark communities. In addition, paving walking/biking trails were identified as some of the highest ranking facilities by need, at 62% of Community Survey respondents.
 - iii) **Improvements to Pools.** Outdoor swimming pools/water parks were identified as a need by 61% of Community Survey respondents. One of the specific improvements that received the highest very supportive ratings for investing tax dollars was \$225,000 to improve Rehm Pool (41%).
- 3) **Financial Comparison (per 1,000 population).**
 - a) **Operating Budget.** Oak Park ranks 8th out of the 13 benchmark communities in operating budget.
 - b) **Revenues.** Oak Park ranks 9th out of 11 of the benchmark park systems in tax revenues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) **Establish a Park District Model of Governance.** It is the recommendation of the Park District Citizen Committee that the Park District of Oak Park and the Village of Oak Park, independent of any other recommendations in, or actions resulting from the Comprehensive Master Plan, begin immediately to implement the consolidation of all parks and recreation policies, programs, assets, funding, and responsibilities under the Park District of Oak Park. Implementing this governance structure with a sense of urgency is the most effective way to address the historical deficiencies in the parks and recreation delivery model and position the Oak Park community to expeditiously meet current and future needs. A governance structure that aligns in a single organization the community-wide parks and recreation mission with all of the responsibilities, resources, and accountability. It is the strong sense of the Park District Citizen Committee that the Park District model is the best option.
- 2) **Transfer Ownership of the Community Centers with Associated Funding.** This would involve, among other actions, the transfer of ownership of the neighborhood community centers (Andersen, Barrie, Carroll, Field, Fox, Longfellow, Stevenson, and Dole) with the associated funding from the Village to the Park District. This should be done in such a way as to make the Park District financially whole, relative to the neighborhood community centers, and have a zero-net-sum impact on the collective tax burden of the community. This should also include transfer of the parkways from the Park District to the Village under the same terms and conditions.
- 3) **Establish Sustainable Funding Mechanisms.** Recognizing the previously identified historical funding deficit under which the Park District operates, it is also the recommendation of the Park District Citizen Committee that the Board of Park Commissioners begin immediately, independent of any other recommendations in, or actions resulting from the Comprehensive Master Plan, to assess and pursue any and all appropriate funding mechanisms in support of the "sustainability" standard identified in the "best practices" evaluation.
- 4) **Strengthen Partnerships.** An equally important element in addressing sustainability for meeting current and future needs, and a "best practices" standard, is an emphasis on partnerships to create maximum community benefit from collective assets. Since it is in the best interest of the community, with potentially the least impact on the taxpayers, the Park District Citizen Committee strongly encourages the Park District to aggressively pursue partnerships with other community organizations (the Village of Oak Park, District #97, District #200, the Township of Oak Park, the Oak Park Library, the YMCA, etc.) in providing facilities and programs.