



Jan 20, 2004

Memorandum

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board
VIA: Jeff Zyontz, Chief,
Countywide Planning Division
FROM: Tanya Schmieler, Park Planning and Resource Analysis (301) 650-4392 TKS
SUBJECT: 2003 UPDATE OF THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY RECREATION DEPARTMENT'S RECREATION FACILITY PLAN

Staff Recommendation

Transmit comments to the Recreation Department on the 2003 Update of their Recreation Facility Development Plan.

Summary of Primary Concerns

- The needs methodology for projecting future recreation center demand should be based on an analysis of existing use and facility capacities, not on a national persons per center standard.
- The increased size of the prototype recreation center may be warranted, however they may serve more residents. Smaller centers serve an important function in low-income communities. Urban prototype facilities are not identified in the plan.
- Location of the centers on parkland may work in many instances, but it is essential that Park staff be involved in the site selection process to minimize environmental impacts and displacement of existing park uses.

Discussion

The Recreation Department has indicated that the primary purpose of the new plan is to update the 1988 Recreation Facility Study and make revisions to the proposed size and features of a prototype center and the population to be served. They are proposing to elevate the status of the original report from a study to a formal plan after providing an opportunity for community input.

M-NCPPC staff was invited to participate in a committee that was developing the Plan Update. Staff has previously requested changes to the draft

and the Recreation Department has already responded by making several adjustments to the Plan. Staff continues to have some significant concerns, however with the primary recommendations of the update which are explained below.

- 1) **Determining Need and Population Served.** This issue is one that gives staff the greatest problem, both with the way the need is determined and the selected standard.

Need methodology- Needs for recreation facilities are generally best determined by analyzing the current number of existing users as related to facility capacities. Examination of the inadequacies of existing spaces, current usage trends and population projections is also important in determining future needs. This type of needs analysis is called for by the new Maryland Department of State Planning guidelines for development of the 2005 Park, Recreation and Open Space Plan.

The Recreation Department should identify (on a population service map) the number of current and future recreation centers and illustrate how the proposed facility and its size will work within a planned network of recreation facilities (current and future) so that the unmet geographic area facility service needs can be understood. It is our experience that different age groups use recreational facilities at different rates. We understand that the Recreation Department has a recently completed user survey. Hopefully it includes the information needed to complete this analysis. It may change the conclusions of the report. In some cases the recommendations for new facilities do not match population "needs" as defined in the plan. For example, the Plan shows that Bethesda has the greatest space deficiency, but the Plan does not indicate a proposed new center. Conversely, the western county area has the lowest need and it is recommended for a new center.

Population Served - The Recreation Department has projected needs for future recreation centers by estimating the number of people to be served by each Recreation Center. In the 2003 Plan Update, the proposed population served by the new prototype centers has been reduced from 40,000 – 50,000 in their 1988 Plan to 30,000, even though recommended center size has been increased from approximately 23,000 to 33,000 net square feet. There is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that this ratio of population to facilities is what is called for. It is recognized that projecting recreation facility needs is a very difficult and inexact science. However, need should be based on current use and demonstrated overcrowding of existing centers, not an arbitrary standard. Usage figures and capacities should be added to the Plan and used to project needs.

Montgomery County's socio-economic profile is very different than the nation as a whole. Even within Montgomery County, there is anything but homogeneity. There is a "one size fits all" philosophy in the plan that does not respond to the diverse character of Montgomery County. We are increasingly urban and have communities with different economic resources. There is no recognition in the plan of privately provided facilities that may offset public needs. There is little recognition of the urban conditions of the County within the plan.

- 2) **Size of the prototype recreation center** -The proposed update increases the size of the prototype recreation center to 33,000 net square feet to accommodate a senior citizen program. The Plan advises against the development and continued operation of the smaller Neighborhood Centers (such as Scotland and Good Hope) as they are costly to maintain, serve a small population and can not adequately provide the longer spaces required by some programs. However, they are not recommending discontinuing the operation of any small centers at this time.

Staff is not opposed to the larger prototype center, and understands that it can provide a greater number of programs in a more efficient manner. However, it is felt that a "one size fits all" approach may not work for all communities. The smaller centers were primarily developed to serve walk-to low-income communities because parents could not transport children to centers farther away. The April-Stewart Lane Community is an example of such a community, and County staff is currently working with M-NCPPC to see if a site can be found in this area to serve the many thousands of apartments that need recreation services in the area.

- 3) **Location of the Centers**- Another revision recommended in the new Plan update is that "as a priority, the center should be located in a publicly owned park like setting; on a piece of land that is large enough to support active outdoor play space including ball fields and courts. Typically ten acres or more is the required minimum." After park staff expressed severe concern, the Recreation Department revised this statement from a previous wording that stated new centers should be located in public parks.

There are many instances where a new center can be placed on parkland without problem, however staff is concerned that excessive pressure to put centers in parks may displace existing park facilities and compromise environmental protection, particularly in urban areas. It is essential that the current site selection process managed by the Department of Facilities and Services be amended to require that park representatives be included on the selection committee when any parkland is under consideration.

The Plan recommends that the centers be served by public transportation and other ways than by automobile, such as sidewalks and trails. Staff feels that this is particularly important for the many children and others who may not have use of a car.

The Plan is being discussed with the Board at this time to have a discussion prior to its presentation to the PHED committee on February 5, 2004. Jeff Bourne, Chief of Community Services Program Division, from the Recreation Department developed the Plan update, but is currently out of town on business. Mr. Bourne offered to present the Plan to the Board at a future date and answer any questions, prior to its presentation to the full council.