



# Community Input Report

*Community Forum and Focus Group Feedback*



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## Overview

The Northbrook Park District hired Heller and Heller Consulting, Inc. of Oak Park to conduct a series of Focus Groups and Community Forums. The meetings are part of a Public Input process regarding the 2011 land acquisition at 180 Anets Drive in Northbrook.

The purpose was to provide an opportunity for the Northbrook community to discuss the results of the 2012 Community Survey. The survey was conducted as a follow-up to the 2009 Community Interest and Opinion Survey regarding parks and recreation facilities, programs and services. The 2012 Survey addressed facility and indoor programming needs, specifically at the new six-acre site, the Leisure Center and Sportsman's Country Club. The survey process was managed by Ron Vine of Leisure Vision, Inc., Kansas City, Missouri, during January and February 2012.

Meetings were held in March, 2012 and included eight Focus Groups and three Community Forums. Focus Groups, identified by the District as primary stakeholders, represented a variety of participants, including:

- Active adults 55+ years old
- North Suburban Special Recreation Association (NSSRA)
- Northbrook Chamber of Commerce
- School District Officials
- North Suburban YMCA
- Northbrook Historical Society
- Park District Affiliates for baseball, soccer, theatre
- Park District staff and board members

The Community Forums were open to the public; both users and non-users of the District attended. Nearly 90 individuals attended the Community Forums. Meetings were held to facilitate discussion about the same topic areas as the Focus Groups. Sub-groups met in a more informal and smaller setting to delve into the topic areas more specifically, including the following five categories:

- **Facilities**
  - **New Community Center**
  - **Leisure Center: Ideas for Renovations/Improvements**
  - **Sportsman's Country Club: Ideas for Renovations/Improvements**
- **Parks**
- **Programs**
- **Budget: Financial Considerations**
- **Stewardship: Partnerships**

## Key Findings and Recommendations

The following outlines the key findings generated from the public input process and recommends the next steps the Park District should take.

Overall, there is a feeling of satisfaction with the District's services, including the quality of parks, programs, and facility operations. Park questions yielded satisfactory remarks about the quality of park maintenance, variety of parks, and location of parks. There is a significant level of interest in open space, trail development and connectivity. Keeping land out of development is considered a good investment.

***Recommendation – Continuation of Public Input process:*** Provide a summary of information to the community by posting the results from the Community Forums and Focus Groups on the Park District website. Develop a process to educate and engage the community in any decision about new or renovated indoor recreation space. The process needs to be community driven.

Participants wanted more information, such as schematic designs, financial information through a feasibility study, cost projections, and an estimate of potential tax impact. They also were interested in potential impact of a new center on existing facilities. There was a prevailing sentiment of concern about taxes in general.

***Recommendation – Complete a feasibility study:*** In order for the public to have an educated opinion about their level of support for additional indoor recreation space, it is necessary to have information about the cost of renovation to the Leisure Center and new indoor recreation space and how the Park District would pay for it. Furthermore, taxpayers need to know what type of tax increase could result from renovations/additional space. Specifically, the Park District needs to:

***Complete a feasibility study*** to determine the following:

1. Cost to build and operate a community center
2. Cost to renovate and operate the Leisure Center
3. Cost to the residents and funding source for improvements
4. Potential impact on similar service providers

Attendees agreed that partnerships should be considered before moving forward with any indoor space renovation or development.

***Recommendation – Consideration and exploration of partnership opportunities:*** The desire for partnerships is extremely important. Extensive review of possible partners for new or renovated space as identified within this report: Government Agencies, Non-Profits, Private Sector Organizations

## Key Findings and Recommendations - continued

There seems to be a lack of awareness about the Leisure Center. For those using the Center, there were many comments about the building's limitations. There was a variety of responses about the inventory of recreation programs. The age segment most frequently mentioned as needing more attention was the active adult age group.

***Recommendation – Develop Preliminary Design Concepts:*** *Based on the information supported by the 2012 Survey, create a plan for addressing indoor space that outlines the anticipated program spaces, prioritized according to public need. This includes creating an overall vision of indoor space within a new community center and renovated Leisure Center. The Park District should engage architectural services to develop a preliminary schematic design of any new building space and/or renovated Leisure Center space.*

### ***Develop preliminary design concepts***

- 1. Create conceptual design and amenities included for a new community center*
- 2. Create conceptual design for renovated Leisure Center*

Opinions about Sportsman's Country Club were mixed. Many of the attendees do not play golf and didn't have a sense of needed improvements. However, when specific improvements were discussed, such as the clubhouse and tee-to-green cart paths, individuals were supportive as long as the funding came from golf course revenues.

## Community Input Report

### Facilities: New Community Center

Those who support developing a community center mentioned their need to leave Northbrook to fulfill their recreation needs. Residents most frequently mentioned using park district facilities in Glenview and Deerfield. Some residents wondered why neighboring communities could have very nice community centers but Northbrook does not. Those mentioning the need for a community center expressed the feeling that the fees for a public facility are lower than private facilities, which is appealing.

A Northbrook community center was perceived as a facility that would create a sense of community, which is a very desirable attribute for some residents. There is an appeal for a multi-purpose center that allows the entire family to participate at the same time. Further, many would like to see something for as many age groups as possible.

There is an expressed need for additional programming space for senior activities, particularly as a result of an aging population. The most common amenities desired in a new center are indoor walking track, fitness center, group fitness space and indoor athletics. Only a handful of participants mentioned the need for an indoor aquatics facility.

Focus Group participants expressed reluctance due to costs or needing time to assess what is available. However, they made it clear that multi-generational programs in one space are highly desired by the community. A walking/running track was greatly desired as well. The staff reported community interest in gym/fitness space or a gym with multi-purpose rooms for programming.

Specific responses from participants included:

**Facilities:** Would be nice to have “hubs” for programming space so that families are not traveling from one extreme destination to another; the Park District has spent money to buy land and should use it to build a center; an indoor pool would serve many people for lap swimming and warm water therapy; if we go to the YMCA, we have to pay a separate fee to swim there; we would love to have an indoor center to use during the winter; we have a lot of affiliates that would use the facility; maybe the new center is more active and the Leisure Center is not as active; thinking about an 80,000 square foot facility, maybe as much as 100,000 sq ft; just because land was purchased does not mean it needs to be immediately developed; indoor artificial fields for soccer, lacrosse, baseball; indoor water park; universal design features.

The fitness element seems to have the most varied response, from those that feel fitness centers are already meeting the needs of the community to those who feel it is an unmet need the Park District should service.

**Fitness:** Walking/running track, indoor walking space, fitness equipment and machines are desired; walking track during the bad weather seasons; fitness center space and support spaces for group fitness.

**Programs/Youth:** What about a Teen Center? Place to connect youth in a central area; fitness classes for 12-18 year olds; parents are feeling pressured to get kids involved earlier; it is disconcerting to us that we don't have the space to provide them.

## Facilities: New Community Center - continued

**Programs/Senior:** There is a conflict between seniors and kids when it comes to using the space at the Leisure Center; feels like the kids get the priority not us; would like to see facility for adult and seniors and give the kids their own space; seniors get shuffled around in the summer so day camps can come in and use the space; our Park District has been very youth focused; need more activities for older adults; some seniors use the Leisure Center for exercise and bridge classes, but for other activities such as walking and swimming, participants like going to Glenview Park Center; Glenview has a great Senior Center and has dedicated space for seniors; would like to see more programs for seniors, specifically an indoor pool for lap swimming; other providers are too expensive (i.e., member of Mission Hills condo subdivision has to pay \$4,000 a year for clubhouse and pool).

### Sportsman's Country Club: Ideas for Renovations/Improvements

There were mixed reviews about spending money to improve Sportsman's. Some of the participants were supportive and others were not. Attendees said that if the golf course could provide funding for its improvements, they would be supportive. Specific improvements to consider would be mini-golf, clubhouse expansion, electric carts, and tee-to-green cart paths. Other specific responses include:

**Facility:** The driving range and mini-golf need upgrades; like Sportsman's as it is, but I would like to see a true country club atmosphere with a better clubhouse; golf could use some of the new space for youth golf; parking lot is not well designed.

**Course:** The first hole needs to be improved; have done a nice job with improvements they have made; restroom 'situation' on the east side needs improvement; course is in great shape.,

### Leisure Center: Ideas for Renovations/Improvements

Participants were asked if they use the Leisure Center. Most of the attendees said they used it, though some used it very infrequently. A handful of residents did not know the Leisure Center existed. The 30 – 55 year olds in particular did not use the center as it isn't appealing to their age group. Common use of the Leisure Center included birthday parties, theatre events, and senior activities, such as fitness and art programs.

Many participants mentioned liking the proximity of the facility to their houses, Theatre programs were mentioned prominently as being well received. Customers also praised Staff for their service and friendliness. The building's cleanliness was also impressive to many of the attendees.

**Building limitations or dislikes:** Many commented on the parking limitations of the facility and lack of drop-off area and an easy entrance/exit. They said program spaces are not multi-purpose and the building does not feel like a community center. Staff also feels that there is a lack of space for offices, storage or just general program space.

**What should be done to the Leisure Center:** There were a wide variety of responses. Some of the most frequent responses included ensuring adequate return on investment to any improvements. Other ideas included reconfiguring parking and a drop-off area, the need for more building storage, more senior programs, overall need to improve building aesthetics, lobby waiting area and green initiatives, including energy efficiency. The building also should have Wi-Fi.

Other specific responses include the following:

- The core of the Northbrook facility doesn't offer anything
- The building isn't configured well
- My daughter is in the Theatre program and enjoys it
- Third time I have been at the Leisure Center in the 20 plus years I have lived here
- My kids did their preschool here, but that is the last time we used it
- Have never taken a class here
- There is no central focus to the building
- Leisure Center doesn't feel like a community recreation facility
- Could tear down this building and create a new one
- Need more indoor facilities
- The building is antiquated

Staff provided a lot of feedback based on their experience and patron input relating to the usefulness and constraints of the Leisure Center. Many expressed difficulties with traffic patterns, parking, lack of accessibility, multiple entrances and security. Seniors would like to move to the new center if there are new amenities they would like. Ideally, they would like their own space.

## **Parks**

Comments included a wide range of ideas from new amenities to ideas for improvements. Many comments for new amenities in parks related to the desire for connectivity among the parks, more green space, tennis court lighting, and a dog park. Some feel the Park District should concentrate on improving existing facilities rather than allocating resources on new amenities. While most participants feel the Park District does a good job maintaining parks, there are still improvements needed such as ball field maintenance.

The overwhelming majority of comments included overall satisfaction with the number, distribution, and quality of parks. Participants are very satisfied with the efforts by staff in maintaining the parks. While some feel the number of parks is satisfactory, there were comments about the lack of general indoor recreation space.



## **Programs**

Attendees commented about the aging population and the need to take care of older adults. They mentioned the need for more adult programming, such as fitness, concerts and programs for working adults.

On the other hand, parents of children were generally very satisfied with the number and variety of programs offered for their children. Some Northbrook residents have memberships to the YMCA, Glenview facility, or other facilities to satisfy their recreation needs.

Here are some specific comments: the Park District does not have adequate indoor space, and as a result, there is a lack of opportunity for indoor programs, like volleyball, basketball etc. Northbrook makes the best out of what it has but it doesn't seem to be enough to draw all residents to the District and doesn't reach all members of the family; Performing Arts such as music are important; it is difficult to use the high school, even though facilities are available at specific times; more program space in Northbrook would be ideal because it is centrally located in the NSSRA service area.

## **Budget: Financial Considerations**

Financial considerations were a concern for many participants. There is significant unease about the thought of raising taxes for a new center. Those participants affiliated with other fitness providers feel it would be much less expensive to renovate the Leisure Center and rely on the other providers in Northbrook. However, others referred to the 2012 Survey, in which a large number of households expressed willingness to pay an additional \$9 a month to fund improvements such as new indoor space.

In addition to those who expressed reservations about a community center and those supporting it, there were others who felt they could not offer an informed opinion without the benefit of additional information from the Park District. There is no projected cost, and people are not ready to make a commitment for a new center.

When asked if the Community Forum participants would be likely to support a referendum for Park District improvements, specifically related to a new indoor center, those affiliated with other fitness providers said no. Other participants said they may be supportive, depending upon what the referendum language included. Some would support making improvements to the Leisure Center and not a new community center. If a referendum question separated the Leisure Center and a new community center, they would be more inclined to vote yes. Specific comments included:

- It's important for the Park District to educate the public on their efforts relative to this
- Would be willing to participate in a campaign to support a new center
- I don't want to see my tax share for the Park District increase
- If the population feels the money will be well spent, they will support it
- Listening to what the community wants is most important. If you give what the community wants, then there is a better chance

### **Stewardship: Partnerships**

The Community Forum groups discussed partnerships in general for the Park District, as well as partnerships related specifically to new indoor space. Whenever partnerships were mentioned regarding new indoor space, the YMCA was mentioned most frequently as a possibility. A few residents commented that the YMCA facility is rundown and in need of upgrades so they were not inclined to become members. A few attendees also said they were not interested in joining a facility operated by the YMCA for personal reasons.

It is important to note the significant presence of participants who have an affiliation with the North Suburban YMCA, either as board members, staff or general members. The YMCA Executive Director, staff and members attended the meetings to support the YMCA's partnership idea with the Park District. As a result, the opinions of YMCA staff and members were very strong throughout the public input process. To these participants, providing funding to the YMCA for improvements to its facility seemed like a good partnership idea. The majority of these attendees opposed the idea of building a new community center and cited partnerships between the YMCA and municipalities throughout the country. Others present were interested in more information on all types of partnerships the Park District could pursue.

The other frequently mentioned partnership was with the school districts. The joint construction of the Greenbriar School gym was mentioned as a great model of governmental partnership. Relationships like this can assist in the expansion of before and after school programs. It was also suggested that the Park District could seek agreements with other park districts such as the beach and pool agreement with Glencoe Park District. Other potential partners included Five Seasons, hospital/health care facilities, and physical therapy groups as a way of promoting community fitness and wellness activities. NSSRA is very interested in partnering and would love the opportunity for more indoor space use in Northbrook as well as the ability for their administrative offices to move to a larger space. Outreach to the corporate community was seen as an important area to pursue with the use of corporate rates for potential members of a new facility.

## Recommended Next Steps

1. Provide a summary of information to the community by posting the results from the Community Forums and Focus Groups on the Park District website. Develop a process to educate and engage the community in any decision made about new or renovated indoor recreation space. The process needs to be community driven.
2. Complete a feasibility study to determine the following:
  - Cost to build and operate a community center
  - Cost to renovate and operate the Leisure Center
  - Cost to the residents and funding source for improvements
  - Potential impact on similar service providers
3. Conduct extensive review of possible partners for new or renovated space as identified within this report: Government Agencies, Non-Profits, Private Sector Organizations
4. Develop preliminary design concepts
  - Create conceptual design and amenities included for a new community center
  - Create conceptual design for renovated Leisure Center

## Conclusion

This phase of the Public Input process provided the Northbrook community an opportunity to discuss the results of the 2012 Community Survey. The District's intent was not to obtain specific recommendations but to hear from the community about various topics, such as a potential new community center, renovation of the Leisure Center, Sportsman's Country Club improvements, satisfaction with Northbrook parks, partnership possibilities and funding questions, such as referendum support. While the Focus Groups and Community Forums considered a variety of topics, the discussion concentrated on a possible new community center and potential renovation of the Leisure Center.

The Northbrook Park District would like to continue the Public Input process and offers several ways that residents can stay connected.

Residents can download a copy of this report at [nbparks.org](http://nbparks.org)

To comment on this report, call the Park District at 847.897.6105 or send an email to: [info@nbparks.org](mailto:info@nbparks.org)

The Park District will continue to update the Community Input process on the website at [nbparks.org](http://nbparks.org)