

Appendix C: Focus Groups Summary

Introduction

ACP conducted six focus group sessions over a two and one-half day period with over 30 stakeholders and interested citizens. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand the "hot-buttons" and attitudes that exist in the community as well as values and priorities. Each session lasted approximately one hour. The discussion was based on a questionnaire outline that included the following eight parts:

1. Introduction
2. Definition of leisure
3. What works?
4. What does not work?
5. What would you change?
6. Investment priorities
7. Initiatives

As part of the discussion, each participant was asked to edit a "straw man definition" of leisure and recreation in the community, list three short-term and three long-term recreation and leisure initiatives, and prioritize potential investment opportunities (e.g. improve existing facilities, build new, add green space and trails, etc).

Part 1: Key Responses

The following summarizes the key responses shared by the focus groups:

- Most groups agreed that the library was one of the best run and utilized of the City's facilities and that Thornton Park was a well recognized and utilized park (ice rink, pool) even though the existing facilities were not well-designed or maintained. The Nature Park was also cited as being very successful.
- While understanding that the City had limited resources, nearly all groups shared a concern for the condition of existing facilities and the lack of maintenance. Some facilities were noted as underutilized (e.g. Horseshoe Lake and Shaker Lakes).
- The lack of youth facilities and programs, even non-structured opportunities for teen gathering and recreating, was frequently cited as a deficiency. The lack of facilities and programs for seniors was also cited.
- Nearly all groups recognized that well-maintained facilities and well-run programs reflected positively on the community and could be instrumental in attracting young families and potentially spur economic development.
- The lack of well-maintained recreation fields was noted as a major problem, especially when considering their limited number and frequent use.
- Sharing facilities was felt to be a worthwhile effort, but several cautioned that Shaker Heights is not in a position to share equally and that there is a limited distance that residents are willing to travel.
- Building and improving on what facilities the community already has in place was felt to be more worthwhile than investing in new facilities and incurring additional maintenance and operating costs.

Part 2: Definition of Leisure and Recreation

This activity tested the focus groups' notions of how to define recreation and leisure. Their comments are listed below.

- The first sentence, "What" was perceived as too general and does not include reference to address needs of all age groups, especially seniors and singles.

- Twenty-minute range is too far, (as stated in the “What “ sentence), taking in a very wide area, especially when considering the limited mobility of seniors and children.
- Not every park or recreation facility is “neighborhood” oriented (e.g. Thornton Park) as stated in the “Where” paragraph.
- A better tie between schools and the City’s recreation facilities and programs should be emphasized in the “How” sentence.
- Emphasize better utilization of what is available in the “Where” sentence.
- Definition should include economic benefits of having solid recreation, arts and cultural facilities, and programs.
- General wording not specific enough.
- Should make reference to: preserving limited amount of land available, minimizing loss of existing open space, and creating opportunities for additional open space.

Part 3: What works?

1. What works best in Shaker Heights’ Open Space and Recreation facilities?
 - Skating rink very well utilized, with a “robust “ hockey program.
 - Pool at Thornton works well and is a community gathering place. Pool appearance and recent need of major repair point to deferred maintenance. Restroom facilities thought not to be well maintained.
 - Basketball program grades K-7, is an example of cooperation between the school and the City. Program for grades 7-12 and older is not as well utilized.
 - Parent and citizen sponsored recreation programs are the most successful.
 - Shaker Family Center for young children and families works well. Felt that more support was needed from the City.
 - Shaker Lakes walking path.
 - Youth soccer is well organized.
 - Free “stuff” including sidewalks and bike paths.
 - School playgrounds are well utilized.
2. What works best in the Arts and Culture arena?
 - Because of proximity to other facilities, most of “arts and culture” is obtained outside City (e.g. University Circle).
 - Summer Performing Arts Series at the Colonnade is popular.
 - The library and its programs for children are very good and the program is very well run. The facility is also actively used by other communities.
 - School arts, especially performing arts, are very well received.
 - Festivals (e.g. Fall Festival) are well received.
 - Nature Center works very well, especially with schools.
 - Shaker Magazine very useful tool to attract people to reside in area.
 - Because of its rich architectural character and history, Shaker Heights makes an excellent “backdrop” for arts and cultural facilities and activities.

Part 4: What does not work?

1. What does not work in Shaker Heights’ Open Space and Recreation facilities?
 - Limited number of programs offered and the promotion of programs perceived as minimal.
 - Limited amount of space for sports and recreation, especially since girls are participating more actively now.
 - Deferred maintenance of facilities and parks.

- Thornton Park facilities were perceived as being very poorly designed even though it is a good site for a recreation facility.
 - Important to consider needs of all age groups.
 - Little for teens (junior high and high school) to do but just “hang out.” No quality programs or intramural/“noncompetitive” sports available.
 - No senior center to house activities. Surrounding communities have senior facilities.
 - The condition of existing recreation fields is perceived as poor because of inadequate drainage and over-use.
 - Community not perceived as family friendly or attractive to young families.
 - Impossible to host sporting tournaments (which can have some economic benefit) because of limited field space.
 - The City was perceived as having dropped programs that were not “money makers.”
 - Horseshoe Lake was thought to be underutilized. Safety a concern since there is no longer City presence (e.g. paddle boating, wading pool, and sandbox were once activities).
 - Not enough space at skating rink.
 - Playgrounds for young children are well received
 - Summer baseball has become a successful program.
 - Residents going to other communities for park and recreation activities.
 - Recreation department not perceived to be as aggressive as they could be, especially when compared to other communities (e.g. size and scope of activity program).
 - Sussex Park tennis courts could be better utilized.
 - Very few opportunities to play basketball, especially a “pick-up” game.
 - Park and greenspace areas perceived as not well-maintained (e.g. mowing, trimming, and edging).
 - Residents required to maintain property, but City property often not as well-maintained.
 - Singles and retirees left out of recreation programs.
 - Small “corner” parks in residential neighborhoods are nice but have no facilities because adjacent neighbors are concerned about potential impacts (e.g. noise, lighting, etc.).
 - No real good after school programs for children.
 - Fitness trail needs to be upgraded.
 - Community not as bike and pedestrian friendly as it seems, especially when considering lack of bike facilities (e.g. bike stands, bakeshops, etc.) and timing of traffic signals.
 - The pool is not especially well-maintained.
2. What does not work in the Arts and Culture area?
- Too close to other cultural facilities (e.g. University Circle).
 - Art and cultural programs not very visible in the community and not well promoted.
 - There are no really good facilities for the arts. School facilities are not adequate.
 - Summer theater and the lawn at the library (with the community band) are well attended.
 - Art exhibits at the library work well.
 - High school theater and the band are very good.
 - Memorial Day Parade, Pancake Breakfast, block parties and Colonnade parties are popular.

Part 5: What would you change?

1. Remembering your comments and the group’s discussion on what works and what does not work, what would you change that would improve leisure and recreation in Shaker Heights?
 - Utilization of upstairs library space for arts facility

- Establish retail area south of Shaker Town Center as gallery area using existing buildings.
 - Organizations need to speak to one another more, and develop retail centers with arts/cultural facilities.
 - Integrate arts, leisure and entertainment facilities, and activities.
 - Cost of participating in recreation activities could be lower.
 - Maintain facilities. Ice skating rink and Thornton Park are used by other communities and should be top notch.
 - Would support collection of recreation facilities, rather than one large recreation center. Ideally, it would be something that all members of family could use. Lee Road YMCA and JCC are alternatives. Recreation centers in adjacent communities are not doing well financially. Indoor track and weight room that could be shared with private organization.
 - Active involvement of corporations (e.g. Mayfield) is important.
 - Add youth programs for 5th through 8th grades.
 - Add opportunity for non-supervised recreational or “pick-up” activities.
 - Expand bike paths and bicycle facilities.
 - More space for kids to play.
 - Bring recreation services up to par with other Shaker Heights community services.
 - Upgrade existing facilities before investing in new ones.
 - Maintenance and management of existing facilities, including recreation department with “sizzle.”
 - Additional facilities mean additional operating costs, which are not often considered together.
 - Make recreation and parks a priority tool to attract young families to the community (e.g. economic development tool).
 - Sponsor performances at Shaker Lakes, but may be an issue with noise.
 - Study space that is currently under utilized to accommodate potential recreation activity and redevelop.
 - Better coordination of facilities between recreation groups and select sport groups, especially sports fields, may improve utilization.
 - Shaker Heights rich with artists that could be tapped to display work, organize efforts, etc. that could make Shaker a destination place.
 - Add “dog parks” or fenced areas for running dogs, with existing park areas.
 - Consider using artificial turf to avoid overuse of fields during heavily scheduled periods.
2. Shaker Heights is located in a large metropolitan area where a great deal of facilities and programs are available. Would you consider a strategy for leisure and recreation based on sharing facilities in the region?
- Sharing was thought to be generally good idea, with a number of participants open to the concept.
 - Need to identify recreation programs and facility/arts and culture “voids” in other communities that Shaker Heights could fill.
 - There is considerable sharing going on now, even though it is not as convenient as having facilities within the community.
 - Sharing only works with certain programs (e.g. Cleveland Heights will not share fitness facility).
 - Limited number of facilities to reciprocate in Shaker Heights.
 - Collaboration among communities was thought to be very important.
 - Sharing information would be any easy start.
 - Larger Cleveland community already has a number of arts and cultural facilities.
3. If you support this notion of regional sharing, what parameters (constraints) would you apply to it?
- Need to be in close proximity (e.g. Solon too far).

- In scheduling and programming activities, Shaker residents should take priority. There is little opportunity for residents from other communities to participate.
- Institute a pass system that all adjacent communities can use.
- Shaker residents first (for Shaker facilities) and “others” second.
- Make available to non-residents but charge more.
- Need to locate in area that will get optimal utilization from surrounding communities (especially landlocked communities like Shaker) and vice-versa.