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Policy Analysis

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Overview: The Recreation and Leisure Framework Plan (RLFP), Shaker Heights, OH

In the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, Ohio, the municipal planning commission recently embarked on the implementation of a comprehensive plan to enhance the quality of life for Shaker Heights' residents, through enhancement of community-based recreation and leisure activities. The plan, known as "The Recreation and Leisure Framework Plan" culminated as a result of several community input sessions, beginning in May 2004. These sessions consisted of 120 middle and high school students and 250 residents, who worked in small groups to brainstorm and prioritize ideas for community recreation and leisure. By July of 2004, a Recreation and Leisure Assessment Task Force (RLATF) was assembled. This task force submitted its preliminary findings to Shaker Heights' (SH) City Council in October 2004 for public comment. After hearing from hundreds of residents, the RLATF and SH City Council unveiled the the final Recreation and Leisure Framework Plan (RLFP).

The RLFP reflects major ideological underpinnings that relate to valuing government functions which consist of representative planning, community-government involvement, transparency and accountability. The process leading to the final RLFP involved several invitations to the community to share ideas and concerns related to the development of leisure and recreation facilities. This was consistent throughout the planning process, as were the government's efforts to keep the community informed about the brainstorming, decision-making and implementation processes. The government, in conjunction with the task force, provided up-to-date information to residents via the city's website, printed newsletters and community forums. The extent to which the SH City Council promotes transparency and accountability is reflected in all of these mentioned activities. Moreover, the RLATF and City Council invested in best

practice research during the decision-making phase of planning. Other efforts made jointly by the RLATF and SH City Council were the timely posting of relevant government documents on the city's website, City Council's openness to public comment during public meetings and individual Council members' willingness to meet with residents one-on-one to discuss questions and concerns. All of these factors point to an ideological context which indicates supporting fair and equitable government representation geared toward providing constituent satisfaction with municipal services and processes.

Although it is not explicitly stated in this policy, the RLFP posits an inferred definition of family that is admittedly subjected to my own biased interpretation. In this plan, "family" is referred to as "residents". Throughout the development of the plan, the task force recognized the importance of including feedback from all family members (all residents); by ensuring that focus groups represented a diverse slice of the Shaker Heights' population, in terms of age, race and geography. With this said, the definition of family is intuitively synonymous with resident, in that each resident could be assumed to be a part of a family. Alternately, the RLFP does not make any assumptions about what constitutes a family. This is ideologically consistent with a progressive approach to family definition, which recognizes the idiosyncratic challenges inherent in a one size fits all definition to "family". Along these same lines, the RLFP involves a progressive collaborative relationship between families and the government, in that the involvement of residents was an integral part of the planning process. The need to create the RLFP reflects the government's perception that residents (families) have rights associated with accessing recreation and leisure activities within the community that improve their quality of life. When considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the government's

perceived right for residents, to provide high-quality recreation compared to other basic needs, indicates a certain level of community-wide affluence, which could reflect a classist ideology.

The new services and facilities proposed in the RLFP will be provided by the city of Shaker Heights to residents of Shaker Heights and possibly residents of neighboring communities. The latter possibility, making Shaker's recreation and leisure available to residents of neighboring communities is somewhat controversial because of concerns related to funding and the capacity to maintain the quality of utilization for Shaker Heights' residents. This represents a dynamic in which the RLFP and a subset of the community diverge in terms of ideology. The plan to extend access to non-residents denotes a belief in regional collaboration, whereas the community members' in opposition to this part of the plan believe that their taxes should contribute solely to the needs of Shaker residents and that expanding access beyond that involves unjustified risks.

According to the RLFP, the projected funding sources involve a combination of city funds, grants and other inter-governmental funding. With this said, the nature of the inter-governmental funding streams is not expanded on, so that the respective qualifications for funding are not yet clearly connected to the projects within the RLFP. This policy is targeted toward Shaker Heights' residents, in that the RLFP integrated feedback from all segments of the community and sets forth plans that affect all members of the community.

(See <http://www.shakeronline.com/dept/planning/RecreationLeisureAssessment.asp> to view the entire Recreation and Leisure Framework Plan)

Problem Definition: *There are not enough affordable indoor recreation opportunities for economically disadvantaged youth in Shaker Heights.*

To begin, the problem can be best understood if each facet of the statement is explicitly defined. In this problem statement, the word “enough” refers to the capacity to meet the needs of the youth in the community so that all children have equitable access to recreation and leisure activities that will help them conquer developmental milestones in a successful and meaningful manner. Next, “indoor recreation opportunities” could include, but are not limited to, an indoor art center, gymnasium, game room, library, computer cafe with internet access and space to hold special interest classes such as martial arts or music instruction. The phrasing, “economically disadvantaged youth”, denotes children from households that are not able to afford the out-of-pocket expenses associated with fee-for-service youth activities. This could be measured through widely-used sliding fee pay scales like those used by the YMCA and Planned Parenthood. Finally, “youth” refers to all children who are residents of Shaker Heights; however this analysis focuses specifically on older youth (teenagers) because this is the population for which there is currently the least amount of free or subsidized recreation and leisure alternatives.

According to the US Census, 10% of students in the Shaker Heights School District were living in poverty in 2004. Seven percent of families living in Shaker Heights had household incomes at or below the poverty line in 1999 (NEOCANDO, accessed 15 Mar, 2007). Currently, the Shaker Community Center offers after-school activities to older youth at costs averaging \$90 per eight-week session (City of Shaker website, accessed 15 Mar, 2007). It is unlikely that families in poverty, or living near

poverty, could afford to pay \$11 per week per child to participate in socially and physically stimulating activities. Other than self-started activities (e.g. playing basketball in someone's driveway), there are not any free or subsidized recreational opportunities for teenagers in Shaker Heights. The population specified, economically disadvantaged teenagers, is a subset requiring special attention in the area of providing positive after-school experiences. According to the Shaker Heights High School's State of Ohio Report Card for the 2005-2006 school year, 18% of the school's students are considered economically disadvantaged. This equals a total of 425 high school students who were facing financial challenges in the previous school year. The large number of students represented in that figure indicates a great amount of students who experience limited exposure to stimulating and productive activities during their leisure time.

The benefit of recreational alternatives for teenagers has been shown repeatedly in studies used to inform various after-school programs. These benefits range from enhancing youth's social skills, academic achievement, peer relations, reducing risk factors related to substance abuse, sexual experimentation and criminal activity (Afterschool Alliance, 2005). All of these factors illuminate a current gap, along socioeconomic lines, in access to developmental activities that contribute to individual children's capacities to successfully compete in both the educational and employment arenas. In addition, the lack of access to community-based recreation for youth may influence other challenges pertaining to the greater community such as the looming academic achievement gap, juvenile delinquency and racial segregation among neighborhoods, all of which the SH City Council has pledged commitments toward eliminating.

Other communities have recognized the need for provisions of youth activities and have created spaces specifically designed to meet these needs. For example, Cleveland Heights is currently in the process of expanding its youth center to incorporate a Boys and Girls Club, where all participants will be required to pay an affordable \$7 per school year per participant fee (Heights Youth Club website, accessed 15 Mar, 2007). The YMCA of Greater Cleveland continues to provide recreational services to youth, using a sliding fee pay scale according to household income and family size (YMCA website, accessed 15 Mar, 2007). The Shaker Heights community has also recognized the growing need for more alternative recreation for youth. This is demonstrated in the above-mentioned Recreation and Leisure Framework Plan, which sets out to, among many other plans, create a skate park and two outdoor basketball courts at Thornton Park. However, it is unclear whether the teens in most need of access to these facilities are geographically situated to utilize them. The data show that most of Shaker's low-income families are situated in south Shaker, about two miles away from Thornton Park (US Census website; NEOCANDO, accessed 15 Mar, 2007). Parents will likely face other challenges within the community if they allow their children to walk across major business areas to reach these outlets and then allow their children to play unsupervised.

Moreover, these facilities are only seasonably available to youth. The RLFP does not outline any ideas for indoor youth recreation, despite the fact that this was repeatedly mentioned in the community forums as being desirous additions to the community (City of Shaker website, accessed on Mar 14, 2007). In fact, during one of the first community meetings, it is listed that residents ranked the development of a multi-purpose community/recreation center toward the top of the wish list. Further along in the process, as ideas were scaled down, the framework became deficient of any provisions for indoor

recreation and leisure. The yielding conclusion is that while it is clearly beneficial to the entire community for youth to have productive, healthy and supervised recreational options that are accessible year-round, the RLFP currently does not propose such options.

Evidence

The Shaker Heights Youth Center (SHYC), located in the south Shaker Lomond neighborhood, operates several youth programs that encompass preventative, academic, mentorship and leadership development for children in the Shaker Heights' School District. The SHYC provides services to children in Kindergarten all the way through high school. The organization has a long-standing positive reputation in the community and was established in 1970. Currently, the SHYC is located on the second floor of an old church. The space for which the staff and participants operate consists of a few aging Sunday school classrooms, a long hallway and a couple of offices. (Lisy, J., 2007)

In conversations with John Lisy, the Director of the SHYC, the Director explicitly stated that the current location of the SHYC is not conducive to the services he would like to see available to community youth (2007). Taking into account his own observations of community youth and their respective developmental needs, he cited indoor recreational and artistic space as an essential resource. Additionally, he mentioned the need for the SHYC to be located in a place that reflects the population it serves, meaning that the space should be able to accommodate activities informed by the youth and should integrate their ideas into the aesthetic design of the center.

Furthermore, Director Lisy conveyed confidence in his organization's ability to raise capital funds to build a new facility, but cited the lack of committed operational funding, post-capital project, as a major roadblock to the organization's plan to expand. In his experience, he felt that cultivating long-term ongoing financial commitments for

operations was the primary challenge to further development of a new youth center. Specifically, the lack of sustainable funding for youth after school activities, in general, constitutes a pervasive problem that also affects the Shaker Heights Youth Center's capacity to expand and provide necessary after-school programs.

The RLFP proposed by the RLATF and SH City Council comes with a financial commitment of at least \$1M from City Council and the Mayor. In light of the SHYC's lengthy experience with the community's youth, it would seem practical to strongly consider the organization's professional recommendations for further recreational opportunities geared toward youth. Even so, it is unclear as to what extent the staff of the SHYC advocated for these efforts during the planning process of the RLFP. Either way, it seems that the statements by Director Lisy should carry weight in substantiating the need for affordable indoor recreation activities for youth in the Shaker community.

Another form of evidence that this is a problem, while less measurable, is my own experiences, as a resident of SH, observing youth partaking in unproductive or unstimulating activities such as standing around on street corners, outside of public places and at entrances to the library. The data to support this observation are not readily available because these are not criminal offenses and there have not been any other surveys or reports of these activities completed. Even so, without the hard data, talking to other members of the community and living in south Shaker myself, it is clearly an observable issue.

In a recent meeting with a Shaker Councilman, Brian Gleisser, he concurred that this is an ongoing challenge, as many residents and business owners complain about the kids standing in groups in various places throughout the community. The Councilman also stated that he agrees that this problem goes hand in hand with the lack of affordable

indoor recreational activities for economically disadvantaged youth. This also demonstrates that this is not just a problem for the youth and their families, it is also a problem for business owners, upset residents, the police force (who has to respond to complaints), and city officials (who also have to mediate and respond to complaints).

Alternatives and Criteria

Alternatives to the current iteration of the RLFP, in light of the inherent lack of indoor recreation for youth, could be examined according to the following protocol:

1. Does the proposed alternative meet the stated needs of the population specified?
2. What is the feasibility, in terms of cultivating community support for the alternative?
3. What is the feasibility, in terms of funding the alternative proposal?
4. What are the anticipated short-term and long-term outcomes of each alternative?
5. How well do these anticipated outcomes address the identified problem?

There are several angles to this problem which must be considered when developing potential alternatives. They each require a consideration of the facts from the perspective of particular interested parties. This type of approach will provide a combination of alternatives that have the potential to be negotiated into plans supported by the interested parties. The first plan proposed here attempts to look at this problem from the standpoint of the municipal government and yields an approach that encourages community organizations to meet the recreational needs of youth. The second plan sets out to solve this problem from the viewpoint of the Shaker Heights Youth Center and involves the expectation of the local government to aid in funding an expansion of the

Center's services and operations of a new facility. The final alternative outlined here attempts to approach this problem from a community advocacy standpoint, which tries to mediate between the collective interests in that it expects some financial investment from both the city and the SHYC, but also offers a mechanism for building a new youth center and sustaining its long-term financial stability.

The first alternative places the responsibility for meeting the "social" needs of community youth on families and community organizations. More specifically, families and organizations could take this challenge on themselves, attempting to make up for the access gap to indoor recreation and leisure activities for economically disadvantaged teens. This model would expect the SHYC to raise funds to provide more services. Also, this approach would imply a sense of acceptance that there will always be a certain number of children in the community who are not financially capable of participating in extracurricular activities.

In defense of the position, city officials could refer to the long process by which the current RLFP was developed and cite the multitude of efforts made by the task force to invite community feedback prior to implementation, making the argument that it is too late to make changes at this point in the process. SH City Council and the Mayor could also make the case that adding an indoor facility for youth to the RLFP is not financially possible and therefore not an option. In this scenario, the alternative to the problem is defined by the lack of an alternative, which could be a legitimate approach from the perspective of the government.

The next idea is that the SHYC take the lead, through a capital campaign, in constructing a new youth center that provides a space for both indoor recreation and leisure activities. Along with the capital campaign, the youth center would solicit a

commitment from SH City Council to provide ongoing operational funds for the sustainability of the center post-construction. The new center would be open to all Shaker Heights' youth and operate on a sliding fee pay scale, administered in a confidential, but accessible way. As is the case in other organizations with this fee structure, the fees paid by more economically advantaged patrons would subsidize the lack of fees by others. This, in combination with the above-mentioned government funding, would provide the operational funds necessary for long-term sustainability.

Finally, the third idea combines the notion of using a non-profit enterprise venture with some government funds, a capital campaign through the SHYC, and a sliding fee pay scale for youth center participants. The use of government funds, a capital campaign and a sliding fee pay scale were explained in the previous sections. The non-profit venture component revolves around the idea that the SHYC and the City of SH agree to subsidize the start-up of a non-profit Kid's Cafe, which would eventually materialize into a consistent funding stream for the youth center.

The Cafe would be a place where parents and caregivers with affluent levels of disposable income could bring their young (infants, toddlers and preschoolers) children to engage in play at age-appropriate play stations, while also enjoying a high-quality beverage and/or snack. In short, the Cafe would offer opportunities for parents, caregivers and children to meet each other, while interacting in a well-researched educational play environment. The Cafe would also offer ongoing activities for parents with small children, including "mommy and me" yoga, story times, special presentations, kids' karaoke night, and hosting children's birthday parties. In addition, the Cafe would offer special seasonal events for children, including a holiday workshop, a "plant our garden" event and an annual costume party. All of these activities, as well as the menu

items, would have a slightly marked-up cost, for which all profits would go directly toward funding the operational expenses of a new youth center. The Cafe would highly publicize the fact that all profits are funneled into the youth center and would provide transparency to patrons about the center's operations to cultivate patron loyalty. The beneficiaries of the Cafe's profits (youth) would be visible to patrons in that some high school students from the youth center would be employed at the Cafe. This approach would add to the community's resources for younger children, while also providing income to the SHYC to serve older youth with high quality services.

Project the Outcomes

The policy to implement an amended RLFP, which incorporates municipal government funding for a new youth center and a Kid's Café, could be evaluated by surveying children and parents about their perceptions of the plan, asking them for specific feedback related to proposed actions. To start, an analysis of a business plan for the Kid's Cafe would be imperative in determining the actual viability of the Cafe as a long-term funding source. This would affect whether the city or the SHYC should invest in such a project. Next, an assessment of the target population, to be served by the new youth center, and a detailed articulation of how the design matches the needs of that population, would be a required. This would necessitate engagement with the youth to be served, assessing their recreational and leisurely interests and ideas, so that these ideas can be integrated into the plan.

Post-implementation, this policy could be evaluated on three distinct fronts. They are: 1. Cafe outcomes; 2. Youth Center outcomes; and 3. Youth's (and families) stated satisfaction with services. Simply put, the Cafe must first be evaluated on the basis of profits. Then, the Cafe should be evaluated on its capacity to garner community support

for the youth center beyond profits, encompassing the cultivation of wide-spread community support for the mission of the youth center. The SHYC should be evaluated in phases, beginning with the initial investment in the Kid's Cafe, the management and development of the capital campaign, the design and construction of the new center, and the operational management of the new center. Pre-construction and during construction, the SHYC would be evaluated according to meeting targeted benchmarks. Post-construction, the center's success would be measured by how many youth are served and the quality of their respective experiences at the center.

The same criteria used to select an appropriate alternative can be employed to gauge the success of the proposed alternative to the original RLFP. A successful policy must meet the stated needs of the specified population, have the capacity to cultivate community support, be fundable, and consist of a logical framework which identifies inputs, outputs and activities; all of which are geared toward short and long-term outcomes.

In closing, the most comprehensive approach to evaluating the outcomes of the new policy would be to assess whether or not it results in the providing adequate amounts of affordable indoor recreation for disadvantaged youth in Shaker Heights. This could be examined by comparing the number of children in need to the materialized capacity of the new facility's programs. This requires a more precise estimation of the target population compared to the anticipated capacity of the new center. Finally, regardless of the policy alternative chosen, the outcomes must be compared to changes in the amount of access to indoor recreation is experienced by lower income youth in Shaker. Out of the 450 stated economically disadvantaged youth attending Shaker High School, a certain number reside in Cleveland (Shaker district) and another segment of high school seniors

would be less likely to participate in youth center programming as they look to the future. Taking this into consideration, a fair evaluation of policy impact would consider if and what progress has been made to increase access to indoor recreation to this subset of the targeted population.

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