

This master plan section contains additional discussion and recommendations related to existing and potential recreation programs and facilities in Prairie Village, as well as discussion on the viability of a city parks and recreation department and/or staff member.

### **City-Sponsored Recreation Programs**

#### **Aquatics Programs**

##### **Swimming and Diving**

These recreation programs are succeeding with attracting participants, are valued in the community, and should be continued into the foreseeable future. Long-term viability and the opportunity for growth, however, will require investments in the physical facilities to assure access to pool time. The outdoor 50-meter pool is expected to need replacement in the next 5-10 years, and is a fundamental element of maintaining the existing program. At that time, if not before, a decision must be made as to the long-term goals of the aquatics programs in the city. If growth of these and other aquatics-based programs are considered worthy of the investment, then an enclosed, year-round facility will be the next step. An opportunity to partner in the development of such a facility has been recently discovered and is discussed in greater detail in the Community Center segment below. True growth in the aquatics programming can only take place when and if a year-round pool is implemented, so long-range planning regarding replacement of the 50-meter pool, and whether or not the pool can be made a year-round facility, should be aggressively pursued as a follow-up to this report.

##### **Adult/Youth Swim Lessons and Masters Swimming**

These programs are currently a partnership effort between Prairie Village and Johnson County. All indications are the programs are functioning well, and thus should continue on in their current format.

#### **Tennis**

As with the aquatics programs, tennis programming for youth and adults is well-established in the community. The tennis courts are in good condition and well-distributed in the various parks. While additional courts would likely be used if built, the parks space is limited in such a way that adding courts would not typically be considered the highest and best use for existing park spaces. Thus, the primary effort in regards to tennis programs should be geared toward maintenance of existing facilities and programs. The master plan for Harmon Park does, however, recommend the installation of a centrally located pavilion in the Harmon Park tennis complex for the administration of tennis tournaments. Relocation of the practice tennis courts is also detailed in the park plan, due to a proposed re-arrangement of other park features.

#### **Other Recreation Programs and Providers**

The vast majority of recreation programming currently available to residents is offered by organizations outside the City of Prairie Village. The residents have indicated via the survey that they are regular patrons of programs offered by these outside agencies, and it is a positive situation that these programs are available. That said, it is recommended that the city

regularly communicate with these agencies to determine if there are ways in which the city can encourage more programming offerings to be provided at locations within Prairie Village. This is especially true for programs offered through Johnson County as well as sports organizations that cater to the youngest ages. In discussions with the County, they have continually expressed an interest in increasing their offerings in Prairie Village, which will require the space to do so. More discussion on this need can be found in the Community Center segment below. While the challenges of increasing local youth sports programming within the city are significant, as outlined in Section 2 of this report, there are factors at work that can alter the willingness to overcome some obstacles. Namely, the costs of transportation coupled with the current economic conditions will give more credence to looking for “close-to-home” recreation. At a minimum, an annual review meeting with these organizations should be conducted to assess changes in services and facilities and the city’s role in helping keep programs accessible to its residents.

The city’s most prominent role in the provision of youth sports opportunities is through the availability of practice fields and the associated maintenance efforts that are required to keep them in good condition. There are various specific recommendations offered within each park master plan that attempt to address a few of the more prominent issues which affect the availability of existing practice fields. Most of these improvements are centered around improving drainage issues. Additionally, installation of irrigation systems for the heavily-used practice field areas would be a worthwhile investment in an effort to maximize the quality of the fields, thus helping to get the very most out of these valued, but limited, spaces. Lastly, some opportunities to expand the actual quantity of practice field space are detailed in the park plans and are highly recommended for implementation.

### **50+ Programming**

As previously noted in the Recreation Analysis section of this report, there is tremendous potential for growth in the 50+ recreation offerings in Prairie Village due to the existence of this significant and currently-increasing demographic group within the community. This potential is especially viable should the city be able to partner with the administration and service capabilities of Johnson County Park and Recreation District and/or other providers who regularly serve this population. It is among the highest recommendations offered within this report to urge the city to continue serious discussions with potential partners as a means to better serve the 50+ population. This recommendation is put forth with an understanding that space suitable for such programming must be secured for these opportunities to be realized. The Community Center discussion below outlines some of the most notable options available to address this need, be it an expanded community center building in front of City Hall or a new community center at some other location.

Within the parks and recreation master plan are other recommendations that have the potential to increase services and recreation opportunities for the 50+ community, including better walking trails in the parks and throughout the city, new cultural elements such as an improved amphitheater in Harmon Park, enhancements and expansion of the sculpture garden, and art programs that could be hosted at the proposed “craft shack” in Harmon Park.

### **Adult Recreation Programming**

The only adult-focused (defined as ages 18-50) recreation programming available in Prairie Village is through outside agencies, except for the tennis and swimming programs previously noted. Yet, with current nation-wide economic conditions affecting employment and income, it will become increasingly important for people to find local, minimal-cost options for recreation and socialization. Providing new outdoor recreation programming that makes use of the existing parks and their relatively small sports fields (and limited parking) can begin to address this need. It is recommended that the city “test the waters” with the initiation of some relatively simple recreation options to see if they can become viable, regular programs for its residents. Chicago Ball, which uses a limited flight softball and adult kickball are two programs have had reasonable success in other communities and are specific possibilities. Sponsoring one-time, weekend Chicago ball or kickball tournaments can be an effective way to assess if interest exists for the continuation of these programs. Marketing these “start-up” tournaments as fundraisers for parks or cultural programs in the city may also create an added benefit and increase the level of participation. These programs would require very little investment on the part of the city, but would require efforts to promote the tournaments or leagues and some amount of staff time to assist with team and league formation or tournament administration.

### **Programs for Teens**

Programming for teens is typically minimal in most communities. While the Skate Park in Harmon Park is a well-designed and well-used facility, there are opportunities that can and should be pursued to increase the participation of teenagers in social and recreational activities. The Johnson County Park and Recreation District currently offers a summer camp program designed for this demographic set. By encouraging partnerships through local advertising, participant fee assistance, and providing space and facilities, it may be possible to enhance participation in these existing programs.

After school programs for teens could also be viable if space was available in a community center facility, particularly if the program space could be located within Harmon Park, adjacent to the high school and Skate Park. Additional activities associated with the Skate Park, such as a “Skate Park Crawl”, are worth pursuing. A “Skate Park Crawl” would involve a group of skaters being transported to a series of skate parks in neighboring communities, with the added benefits of socialization, prizes, and food.

Identifying opportunities for structured community service programs may be a way to increase teen involvement and their investment and ownership in the parks. For example, site improvement projects associated with the skate park and the proposed climbing wall can be hands-on experiences that engage the teens and give them a creative outlet and opportunity to make their own “playground”.

### **Children and Families Programming**

There is a national trend focused on family-based education and entertainment which is growing out of a desire for low-cost, safe, and convenient opportunities for families with children to share experiences and increase social interactions. This is even more true for families with toddlers. Although the park system in Prairie Village provides very good options and access for day-to-day play areas, particular potential exists to provide specific

day-time programs, especially the morning hours from 9 a.m. to noon, for parents with young children. Programming for this population could be structured around craft/art activities, nature play and learning, and cultural experiences such as trips to apple and pumpkin farms, etc. As well, the proposed Craft Shack in Harmon Park is designed especially for the purpose of small group art projects, such as would be favored by play groups. Having the benefits of the surrounding destination play areas will increase the potential of these programs, which in effect can offer a two-for-one type benefit for the children (and their mothers, fathers, or grandparents).

The proposed new nature play areas in several of the parks also provide an opportunity for programming centered on children and families. Play-based education programs could focus in such concepts as water-cycles, life cycles of insects and animals, seasonal changes in plants, and many other basic systems of nature.

### **Community Center Possibilities**

Nearly all of the recreation programming categories mentioned above – 50+, adults, teens, and children and families – as well as local committees and arts groups would benefit from the existence of adequate indoor meeting rooms, exercise rooms, art rooms, computer labs, and the like. These types of facilities are typically found, at varying levels of intensity, in centrally-located community facilities. As such, Prairie Village does not currently possess access to such places to truly move forward with expansion of local recreation offerings. Similarly, growth of the local aquatics programs could also be realized if a community center facility was to include indoor pool facilities.

Based on the results of the mailed parks and recreation survey, it is apparent that a basic desire for a community center exists in Prairie Village, and that a majority of the residents value the idea enough to at least consider the option of helping fund its development. A majority of the respondents also encouraged the pursuit of potential partners to help develop and manage a community center. As a starting point for addressing this interest, two basic options were noted and discussed during the course of this master plan process:

- Expand the existing Community Center building in front of City Hall
- Partner with other agencies to develop a new, full-service Community Center

### **Expand the Existing Community Center**

The existing community center building in front of City Hall has proved in recent years to be too small for most programmed recreation activities. It was expressed consistently throughout the master plan process that this facility was not suitable to handle many activities that are desired by residents.

From a physical site perspective, it would be possible to enlarge the existing building to handle a greater use level, but it should be understood that significant changes to the parking and access drives would likely be required to accommodate the scale of expansion needed to make the project viable. That said, this location is very good in terms of its visibility and general access within the larger community. If a goal were only to provide additional meeting space for the community and target the primary needs of an expanded 50+ program such as that outlined by Johnson County Park and Recreation District (see Section 2 of this report), then this building and site should be

studied further. However, if a full-service-type community center is deemed to be preferable, then a new community center site and facility should be considered.

**Partner in the development and management of a new Community Center**

Initial contacts were made with the YMCA, Johnson County Park and Recreation District, and Shawnee Mission School District to understand what, if any, interest these organizations may have in potential partnerships with the City. Each organization has different interests and expectations regarding a community center partnership with the city. The master plan offers the following recommendations:

**Potential Partners**

**YMCA**

The Paul Henson Family YMCA is a long-standing fixture in the community, and is still well attended and used by residents and non-residents alike. It is understood that a significant upgrade to this facility is not long in the coming, therefore logic dictates that conversations should continue to assess the potential benefits to Prairie Village and the YMCA if the two entities were to partner in renovation efforts as a means to provide a community center for the city. These conversations should happen in the near-term, if at all possible, to assure that the YMCA's plans are understood and responded to where appropriate.

**JCPRD**

While Johnson County Park and Recreation District's long-range plans call for county-managed community centers at other locations throughout the county, the city should continue to keep this potential partner up-to-date with its thoughts regarding any potential community center. Changing expectations and new opportunities are always at work, which may allow discussion and changes to long-range plans. Clearly, the Park District is a well-known and respected provider of recreation services in the area and on-going and new partnerships are strongly encouraged.

**SMSD**

During the course of this master plan, it became known that there was interest in developing a natatorium facility to serve the Shawnee Mission School District. Following up on this information lead to an initial understanding that a partnership was possible which would place this facility within Prairie Village for the benefit of both the school district and the City. Coupling this potential with the previously noted citizen interest in a community center makes pursuing this partnership worthwhile and consistent with the expressed goals in the Village Vision. A natatorium facility joined with an adjacent community center would be a clear expression of support for high-quality schools while gaining opportunities for many city-sponsored programs, as well.

### **Summary of Community Center Discussions**

Based upon the convergence of expressed preferences from the park master plan public survey and the acquired awareness of partnership interests from other entities, the park plan encourages the continuation of discussions and discovery, via the city's existing Community Center Committee, regarding the possibility of a community center and/or natatorium facility involving the schools and other public and/or private agencies. These recommendations strongly encourage the city leaders to actively pursue the potential cost-sharing and operating partnerships that have recently surfaced. If a community center facility can be forged with strong partners and commitments, then many benefits to the community – increased recreation programming opportunities, access to healthy lifestyles, social opportunities, and local school support - can all be realized.

### **Parks and Recreation Department or Staff**

With the current availability of recreation offerings though neighboring communities, Johnson County Park and Recreation District, the numerous sports leagues and clubs, and others, the prospect of creating a full recreation department may seem initially to be unnecessary. However, there are elements of the park plan that may begin to suggest that at least a new part-time or full-time recreation staff position is warranted, especially when considered along with the administrative tasks associated with the current aquatics and tennis programs.

First, the recommendations for recreation programs noted above encourage the development of, at a minimum, experimental leagues geared toward adults such as Chicago Ball, Kickball, and other recreational, social-centered sports. Second, the plan notes a need to develop additional, local recreation programs for the teens and families with young children. As well, should a community center facility become a reality, there will be new opportunities, unique to Prairie Village, which will arise simply due to available space. These elements of the park plan would most certainly benefit from the dedicated administration efforts of employed recreation staff.

Additionally, a new staff position could help support the community activities and cultural events which take place in Prairie Village, such as VillageFest and events conducted by the Arts Council. Internal coordination efforts with these groups, and others, could well increase the viability and success of existing programs.

In summary, the need for a recreation staff member will go hand-in-hand with the decision to implement the proposed recreation programming ideas outlined above. The recommendation of this report is to pursue the hiring of a part-time staff member to give focused effort toward initiating at least some of the recreation programs mentioned. The collective tasks of planning, marketing, administering, and monitoring new recreation programs will be required of this position. These programs will not succeed without at least this level of support. The many benefits of recreation, neighborhood and community building, and social interaction are worth the investment.