

Community coalition underlines rec centers' importance

By EILEEN RYAN

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When members of the Columbus Community Coalition gathered to discuss the future of recreation facilities, they had a hard time leaving out the present.

The key agenda item of the coalition's first quarterly meeting of 2009 was to begin to develop a vision of the city's recreation needs three to five years in the future and beyond.

More than 50 members of the coalition -- including representatives from area commissions, civic associations and community groups -- and the community attended to weigh in or just observe at the March 26 meeting.

Catherine Girves, a co-chairwoman of the coalition and member of the University Area Enrichment Association, led the discussion, and it took only one question to launch a thousand responses: "Are parks and recreation centers essential services?"

Many participants were less abstract in their answers. They spoke of the importance of recreation centers for educating children and providing places to go where they can stay out of trouble, and they inevitably lamented the loss of the recreation centers that have been closed to cut the city's 2009 budget.

Those budget cuts prompted this conversation, Girves said, but weren't the subject of it. It is necessary to identify the future needs of Columbus communities in order to identify resources to meet the needs, she said.

Lorraine Brock, a member of the Columbus Recreation and Parks Commission, said a discussion of the future was the right conversation to have at this point.

"Very often, a crisis is an opportunity to do new and great things. I don't think any of us believe that we are going to be in this crisis forever," she said.

"Now is just really a great opportunity to really think proactively and creatively."

Brock also mentioned the importance of government partnering with private organizations in new ways, anticipating the announcement that was made March 27 that seven recreation and parks facilities would be reopened -- at least partially -- through such partnerships.

Other suggestions included increasing fundraising; including operating funds with voted bond issues for capital dollars; and separating recreation and parks from the city government that has repeatedly reduced its budget and making it its own entity, similar to Metro Parks.

Recreation and parks priority, several participants agreed, should be to serve the underserved first -- those who are least able to access the kind of resources the department provides any other way.

A few participants suggested developing specialty recreation centers, such as a central city equestrian center.

One retired teacher in the crowd suggested manning recreation centers with retired teachers.

Participants also mentioned the service recreation and parks facilities provide as an entryway into the community for new residents and a way of attracting young professionals to Columbus.

After the meeting, Girves invited interested members to sign up for a committee to discuss the issues in depth and develop a recommendation to present to the membership.

The initial discussion was a good way to pull together energy and start a working group, she said.

Recreation and Parks Director Alan McKnight, who attended the meeting, and City Council Recreation and Parks Committee Chairwoman Priscilla Tyson, whose aide Carl Williams attended the meeting, are interested in seeing the working group go forward, Girves said.