



CITY OF | **UPPER  
ARLINGTON**  
**OHIO**

## **2006 Parks & Recreation Strategic Plan**

**J. Robert Havlick Award for Innovation in Local Government  
Thomas H. Muehlenbeck Award for Excellence in Local Government**

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## **City of Upper Arlington, Ohio 2006 Parks & Recreation Strategic Plan**

### **Project Summary**

Throughout the course of 2006, a resident-based Task Force undertook an extensive strategic planning process addressing the entire community's parks, facilities and sports/recreational programming. With City Staff support, the Task Force explored existing conditions in detail, and conducted community outreach efforts that included public meetings, stakeholder interviews and surveys to determine community needs and desires in order to establish a series of realistic short- and long-term goals for maintaining and enhancing all aspects of the facilities and recreational opportunities available to the community at large. This entire process was undertaken utilizing the community's "in-house" volunteer experts, creating a resident-driven document unique to the Upper Arlington community and saving the City countless dollars in consultant fees.

### **Situational Analysis**

The City of Upper Arlington is an inner-ring suburb of Columbus, Ohio, located to its immediate west. Incorporated in 1918, the community was developed as a primarily bedroom community. Today, the City encompasses approximately 9.7 square miles with a population of 34,000. Of this population, approximately 50 percent is aged 50 years or above, and trends indicate that the community will continue to age. Landlocked and fully developed, Upper Arlington has few opportunities for expanding its limited inventory of park land and the accompanying facilities and programming that can occur within such space restraints.

Many of the community's recreational facilities are owned and operated by other entities such as public, private and parochial schools, the library system and local churches. While partnerships and space sharing to provide programming already occurs on a broad level, opportunities for further enhancing the shared use of space was clearly apparent.

The Strategic Planning process was initiated following the successful renovation of one of the community's three outdoor aquatics facilities, which had been totally transformed to meet modern day standards. A City Council Pools Committee, in partnership with Staff, had initially developed a plan to address necessary renovations and upgrades at all three aquatics facilities. As the Committee considered next steps in the process, participating Council Members acknowledged the need to broaden the community's consideration to include all available parks, facilities and programming, since many other facilities were also aging and the City faced challenges to the range of services it could provide.

An accompanying challenge to undertaking this process was the community's history in pursuit of a community recreation center. Over the course of several years, a number of opportunities for such a facility had been explored and ultimately rejected by voters. The last such effort had occurred in 2001 and was the cause of significant controversy within the community. As a result, it was acknowledged

that any comprehensive review of the community's sports, leisure and recreational amenities should be undertaken thoughtfully and in such a way that fully allowed for extensive community input in order to obtain resident buy in.

The Council Pools Committee charged the Parks & Recreation Advisory Board (PRAB) with the undertaking toward the close of 2005. PRAB determined that formation of a resident-based Task Force in support of the process was an appropriate means to ensure the resulting recommendations were reflective of the community's needs and desires.

### **Project Impact**

The work of the Task Force and the resulting Parks & Recreation Strategic Plan exemplify the community spirit that is prevalent in Upper Arlington. We are fortunate to have many engaged, educated, professional citizens who believe in giving back to their community and understand the role they can play in effecting change. Likewise, citizens feel empowered and included within the process of local government when their expertise and input is actively sought out.

The Parks & Recreation Strategic Plan successfully provides City Council and Staff with a vision for the future, an appropriate set of guiding principles to use in the decision-making process, and a detailed set of goals and objectives that can be addressed by the City at the appropriate time. This actionable document also is flexible, allowing for adaptation over time as circumstances and funding opportunities evolve.

Internally, the Parks & Recreation Department has reaped many benefits. The Strategic Plan confirms much of the work already conducted by the department and affirms its recent emphasis on facility upgrades and program enhancements. Importantly, it provides the department with a decision-making framework in which to develop an annual work plan for City Council consideration during the budget process.

The Task Force and its community outreach process has achieved much more than was initially expected. With ample opportunity provided residents and stakeholder groups for input throughout 2006, the resulting document is an accurate reflection of community sentiment, as well as the realities and constraints within which we must operate. Additionally, a new set of community leaders have emerged from amongst the Task Force ranks who may not otherwise have become involved in their local government.

### **Who has benefited from this innovation?**

- The community has ownership of a comprehensive strategic plan that will help in the short- and long-term improvements and development of their parks and recreation activities.
- The staff of the Parks & Recreation Department can work within the framework of the Strategic Plan when developing goals, budgets, and other processes in the department's daily workload. The various divisions within the department now share common goals that encourage a team approach, building camaraderie and new partnerships within the department. The Strategic Plan also provides Staff with a comprehensive understanding of the department and its goals, enabling them to communicate fully with residents when discussing particular projects and developments.

- City Council now has the insight from residents it was seeking, to provide invaluable assistance and guidance when faced with policy or budget decisions. The Strategic Plan provides for planning ahead, enabling Council to identify important capital projects and provide for the necessary funding over the long term.
- The volunteers have completed a project of which they are rightfully proud, energized by the knowledge that their work will positively impact the community for years to come.

### **How was the innovation initiated and implemented?**

The Strategic Planning process was initiated following the successful renovation of one of the community's three outdoor aquatics facilities, which had been totally transformed to meet modern day standards. A City Council Pools Committee, in partnership with Staff, had initially developed a plan to address necessary renovations and upgrades at all three aquatics facilities. As the Committee considered next steps in the process, participating Council Members acknowledged the need to broaden consideration to include all available parks, facilities and programming, since many other facilities were also aging and the City faced challenges to the range of services it could provide.

When City Council gave direction for the development of a Parks & Recreation Strategic Plan, no additional funding was set aside to support this immense project. Contracting with a consultant would have essentially eaten the department's 2006 capital projects budget. PRAB and staff determined the best approach would be to solicit residents who also happened to have specific professional or other skills and qualities necessary to successfully undertake the process. It was acknowledged that the Task Force should be comprised of a dedicated set of participants committed to the work ahead and the hours of community service that would be required of them. In addition, to ensure continuity and adherence to an appropriate process, and ultimately support from City Council, it was determined the Task Force should be comprised of all members of the PRAB, three City Council representatives and 10 resident volunteer experts.

Following some targeted recruitment of residents and a broad call for volunteers for this project an impressive pool of interested candidates emerged. As a result, the Task Force benefited from members experienced in research and data analysis, professionals in the parks and recreation field, marketing experts, and more, encompassing a broad range of ages, sex, family makeup, etc. Volunteers were given clear direction and expectations of what was to be expected and that this would be like no other community project they have worked on before.

The Task Force met twice monthly throughout most of the year, forming subcommittees to work on specific components of the process and the resulting Strategic Plan as necessary.

Numerous community outreach efforts were planned and implemented throughout the year:

- A series of three public meetings in the spring held at different locations, days/times in order to accommodate a broad range of participants.
- A series of smaller neighborhood meetings at each of the community's five elementary schools.
- Focus group meetings with community stakeholder groups and user groups.

- Various survey tools distributed at community events, meetings, available at the City's Web site etc., and inclusion of a series of targeted questions within the broader 2006 Community Survey conducted by the City with regard to all services and community issues.
- Task Force presence at the community's primary summer events, concerts and movies series, etc.
- A series of fall meetings to report findings back to the community and discuss next steps in the Strategic Planning process.

Throughout this process, City Staff provided the necessary support to enable the Task Force to perform effectively. This included the provision of various administrative materials and reports summarizing history, existing conditions, providing public notice of meetings, taking minutes, etc. An extensive public relations/marketing effort was also conducted in-house in support of the Task Force's goal of keeping residents fully informed of and engaged in the process.

**What risks were associated with planning and developing the innovation?**

While the benefits ultimately outweighed the risks, it was recognized that a Task Force of community volunteers may not be able to work effectively together, perhaps bringing personal agendas to the process or failing to form a cohesive whole focused on its end goals. The bulk of the workload was firmly placed on the Task Force and there were concerns about how to keep members motivated and excited about creating a community vision that may not include their specific outcome desires.

With several failed community center issues in the City's past, the Strategic Plan process could easily have been perceived by many as another veiled attempt to push this issue through.

Within the Parks & Recreation Department, many staff members were concerned about handing the long-range planning of their department over to a group of residents. Would a volunteer-created document have the necessary credibility and professionalism necessary to be successful?

**What was the environment in which the innovation was created and sustained?**

From the beginning, one of the key components was keeping the process open and available for public discussion. This two-way communication provided immediate feedback, allowed the process to continue on at a fast pace, and kept the public abreast of progress as it was being made. The group environment was nurtured in this way as well. Task Force members and residents were afforded respect and due consideration throughout the process – all ideas and suggestions were documented, contributing to a comprehensive overview of community needs and desires.

The Task Force was also divided into several sub-groups at appropriate stages in the process to complete specific tasks or analysis. This division allowed bi-monthly Task Force meetings to be brief and timely, with sub-groups reporting back on their area of focus.

Over the course of the year, the desired end product evolved from a more traditional 10-year plan to an actionable, living document that must be worked with daily and kept current annually.

**What were the execution costs and savings?**

The cost savings associated with undertaking a Strategic Planning process entirely using volunteer experts with staff support was immense. A traditional plan utilizing consultants would have cost the City upwards of \$200,000.

Beyond staff time, City costs were minimal, including the costs for administrative materials, copying, etc. Promotional efforts and marketing print collateral totaled less than \$7,000.00. The “Focus on the Future” logo was adapted from an existing Parks & Recreation brand campaign to the Task Force’s needs by a graphic designer, otherwise all design work for brochures and advertisements, promotional copy, media releases, etc. were produced in-house by the Community Affairs Office.

**What lessons were learned that could be shared with other local governments?**

- Identify residents who can provide their expertise at little or no cost.
- A plan for a community created by the community is much easier to sell than one created by an outsider.
- Keep no secrets – full disclosure in this process allowed us to positively influence many constituents who came to the process with pre-conceived notions.
- Set deadlines. Not only will this get the job done on time, but your volunteers know exactly how long their commitment is for. If deadlines are extended, be sure it is the group making this decision.
- Bring in new faces – when conducting a community driven plan make sure it is not the same people who seem to volunteer for every community project. The new blood will inspire the group.

**What department and/or individuals championed the innovation?**

- City Council – for not only requesting the plan, but for volunteering three of its members to serve on the Task Force.
- Parks & Recreation Advisory Board – for taking on the challenge from City Council, and working effectively to create a positive and productive environment in which the Task Force could effectively perform.
- Parks & Recreation Department staff – for overall coordination of the process, administrative support and assistance in information gathering.
- City Manager’s Office – for dedication of the Community Affairs Office to provide extensive public relations and marketing support throughout the process.
- City Clerk’s Office – for effectively and accurately capturing the Task Force meetings in a timely manner, enabling the process to move forward at the desired pace.