

Program Excellence Award for Citizen Involvement

POPULATIONS OF 50,000 AND UNDER



MICHAEL A. SCHOEDEL

ICMA's Program Excellence Award for Citizen Involvement recognizes successful strategies designed to inform citizens about the local government services available to them and to include citizens in the process of community decision making. The award concentrates on such areas as community consensus building and adult (non-student) citizenship education. This year, ICMA presents the award in the 50,000-and-under population category to Richmond Heights, Missouri, and City Manager Michael A. Schoedel for the city's parks and recreation program.

The quality of housing, schools, and critical services that are provided by a municipal government are important to citizens, but easily accessible and comprehensive recreational facilities and programs often makes the difference between a livable community and a truly great place to call home. Richmond

Heights, Missouri, took a survey of its citizens and found a desire for more parks and recreational programs. The city responded to its citizens through a program called THE HEIGHTS: the Richmond Heights Community Center and Memorial Library.

The project began in early 1997 with the formation of the Citizens for Recreation Committee, which worked to inform the citizens of Richmond Heights about the benefits of the proposed programs. Consequently, when it came time to vote on a sales tax increase that would go directly to the program's development, voters approved the measure by an overwhelming 85 percent.

After the funding was approved, the process included many opportunities to gather citizen input. Supporters were often seen sporting bright-red lapel buttons that read "Meet me at the community center."

Council members also hosted informal meetings in their respective districts where they answered questions and solicited input through a "sticky dot" exercise. In this exercise, a collection of photos was used to illustrate various styles of architecture, amenities, and activities. Residents were given an envelope containing various colors and sizes of self-adhesive dots which they used to show the options they supported. The results of the sticky-dot exercise and ongoing information articles were shared with residents in the city's newsletter.

Residents were also asked questions about facility operations—most specifically, whether or not they supported allowing nonresidents to use the facility and what rate structures they believed would be fair to apply to them. This later became a key part of the success of THE HEIGHTS, as the city worked out mutually beneficial rate agreements with several neighboring communities.

As the grand opening date neared, the city asked residents to select from one of three designs for the facility's logo. To encourage participation, residents who responded were automatically entered into a drawing for three unique opportunities: (1) to be the first person to dribble a ball on the new basketball court, (2) to be the first to use the waterslide in the new pool, and (3) to receive the first library card bearing the new logo. The recipients were introduced at the ribbon-cutting ceremony and received commemorative gifts before going to take advantage of the opportunities they had won.

The city's outreach to the community has ensured that the completed facility meets the needs and preferences of Richmond Heights residents. THE HEIGHTS has a colorful water park, sauna, and steam room; a two-court gymnasium surrounded by a suspended jogging track; and a 64,000-square-foot fitness area. The 73,000-square-foot structure houses a lounge for seniors and four multipurpose rooms that can be used individually or in combinations for banquets, receptions, classes, health fairs, and other gatherings. As part of the complex, the Richmond Heights Memorial Library has a 13,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art facility.

Could the city's leaders have done this without input from residents? Probably. But it is highly unlikely that their efforts would have been able to replicate the sense of ownership and pride that residents have for their new facility. ♣

The grand-opening of the Richmond Heights Community Center and Memorial Library.

