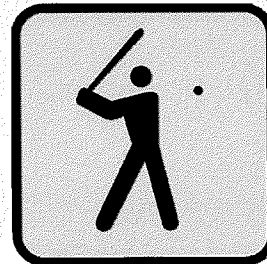




Section 4

Public Input



Public Input

An important aspect of any master planning process is the opinion of the residents of the community. The planning process used for Decatur's recreation and athletic facilities assessment involved a variety of methods for obtaining public input including interviews, a workshop and two public meetings.

Interviews

Beginning in mid-October, the planning team kicked off the study with members of the community who were identified as having a vested interest in the master plan. Interviews were conducted with representatives from the City of Decatur, City of Decatur Recreation Department, City Schools of Decatur, Agnes Scott College, Columbia Theological Seminary, Samuel L. Jones Boys and Girls Club, United Methodist Children's Home, Decatur-DeKalb Housing Authority and the Decatur-DeKalb YMCA. In addition, members of the community were interviewed representing the senior population, citizens with disabilities, tennis players, swimmers, skaters, dog lovers, various homeowner associations, church groups, open space proponents and community garden groups including; The Friends of Decatur Cemetery, Decatur Preservation Alliance and Oakhurst Community Garden.

Interviews with the various groups yielded many of the same comments with respect to availability of athletic fields, gymnasiums and open space. Representatives of the Decatur High School athletic programs provided valuable information regarding the needs of their specific sports teams. Teams on the high school level include football, cheerleading, basketball, baseball, softball, soccer, wrestling, track, swimming, volleyball, tennis and cross-country. The middle school offers many of the same activities, which serve as feeder programs to high school sports.

Interviews revealed the Decatur School System athletic programs struggle for adequate practice time and utilize outdated facilities that lack necessary support amenities, such as storage and locker room space. In many cases, sports teams use facilities which are owned by other entities and located off-campus. The recently-developed high school campus master plan addresses many of the needs of school athletics; however, limited space around the schools means they must continue to rely on alternate locations for some team sports.

Meetings with representatives from Agnes Scott College, United Methodist Children's Home and Columbia Theological Seminary revealed that the majority of their athletic needs are being met on their respective campuses. The exception is the Agnes Scott College softball team which shares a field in Oakhurst Park with the Decatur High School girls softball team and Decatur recreation leagues. Each organization provides public access to its own facilities on a limited basis with first priority given to its students. Each institution is providing valuable amenities to the community, such as an indoor swimming pool, track, athletic fields and open space, that otherwise do not exist.

The Decatur-DeKalb YMCA and the Samuel L. Jones Boys and Girls Club, both partners in this master plan, also met with the planning team to discuss their current offerings and organizational needs. While each provides indoor swimming pools, gymnasiums and programming space, their ability to do extensive outdoor programming is limited by the lack of athletic fields around the facilities. Both organizations expressed interest in whatever joint collaborations may exist to expand or improve the existing recreation facility and program offerings in Decatur. The organizations' reliance on off-site facilities makes them viable partners in the overall master plan.

Representatives of the Decatur senior citizen and disabled populations provided input into the respective needs of those residents. Primary concerns were for better program offerings for each group. The various senior housing developments in Decatur provide programs for residents living in each development; however, minimal crossover occurs between the facilities. A suggestion made by senior representatives was to develop an events calendar that coordinates the various activities occurring for seniors around the community. This would minimize the amount of overlapping activities and increase the number of offerings to participants.

The representatives for disabled citizens expressed the need to provide more programs at the lowest possible cost to participants. Many of handicapped residents live on a very low, fixed Social Security income. Other concerns were for the need to offer social activities that incorporate the handicapped into mainstream programs. The current perception is that they do not feel welcome, which creates a barrier for getting all citizens involved.

Special interest groups involved in tennis, swimming, skating and general outdoor recreation and exercise also took the opportunity to be interviewed. One group expressed a desire for parks that could be used for walking and exercising dogs off-leash. Other groups provided insight into improvements needed at existing facilities and also offered suggestions for facilities not currently available in Decatur.

Swim representatives discussed the popularity of Venetian Pool over the city-owned pools and provided insight into the likely causes. Comments regarding McKoy and Ebster Park pools cited uninviting surroundings and the inability of small children to use the pools due to the lack of shallow areas. Glenlake pool was said to have extreme parking problems and poor support facilities, such as the inadequate bathhouse.

Comments pertaining to indoor aquatic facilities revealed limited availability of the private indoor aquatic centers in Decatur. While Agnes Scott College offers opportunities for public use, the first priority is for the students and faculty of the college. The remaining free time is then allocated to the various groups who want to use the pool which includes several high school swim teams, recreation swim teams and others. The high volume of users keeps the pool scheduled from morning to night.

Interviews with users of the tennis facilities located around the city found the availability of tennis courts very limited as well. Many of the city-owned courts require a key for entry. Tennis courts located at Glenlake Park are staffed by recreation employees

who administer keys to all other facilities. The high school does not have any tennis courts, therefore they depend on the courts at Glenlake Park. Agnes Scott College is currently constructing six new unlighted courts. These courts will not be open for public use. Tennis players who are not able to access courts in Decatur were said to be traveling into the county to use county parks and recreation courts. Noted deficiencies in Decatur were for indoor courts and quantities of courts in one location that could accommodate larger tennis tournaments.

Various churches around the community participated in the interview process as well. Each is involved in providing programming for their congregations while some are also doing extensive community outreach programming. Facilities associated with the churches are made available for community use and provide needed programming space. Several of the church participants expressed a willingness to be involved and are eager to form partnerships with the other groups in the community.

Steering Committee Workshop

In addition to extensive interviews, a steering committee workshop was conducted on November 16, 2001. Representatives from the master plan partners group, as well as the previously-mentioned special interest groups, were invited to participate in an afternoon workshop. Structured to identify critical issues, strengths and weaknesses, and priorities for recreation facilities and programs in Decatur, the workshop provided a basis for gathering public input at the open public meetings.

A total of 25 participants attended the workshop. Members were divided into five "teams" or discussion groups and asked to develop ideas in relation to various questions and exercises. The following represents responses from each group as recorded the day of the workshop.

1. What are the five most critical issues facing the City of Decatur regarding recreation and athletic programs and facilities?

GROUP #1

- Facilities upgrade and flexible use
- Coordination and cooperation of facilities use
- Competitive/repetitive programming (program integration)
- Funding
- Community awareness of facilities and programming

GROUP #2

- Lack of money
- Limited land to expand
- Competing interests for limited space
- Aging and inadequate facilities: pools, recreation centers, bathhouses, stadium, playgrounds, gyms

GROUP #3

- Coordination of existing services
- Funding

- Physical accessibility and attitudes toward inclusion of the disabled community
- Limited space for expansion and parking
- Prioritizing services to meet various needs

GROUP #4

- Facilities update (walking trail)
- Aquatics facilities (indoor pool)
- Coordinate better scheduling
- Safe place to skateboard/rollerblade
- Maximize comprehensive land use
- Who is target user?

GROUP #5

- Changing demographics
- Land/space limitations
- Funding
- Coordination of programs

2. Identify the **STRENGTHS** of the city's programs and facilities.

GROUP #1

- Location
- Varied programming with diverse population
- Program availability to those with limited resources
- Spirit of cooperation/collaboration that already exists
- Responsive to community interests
- Community and city government support
- Uniqueness of the City of Decatur

GROUP#2

- Responsive to diverse interests and needs; many opportunities for a small city
- Relatively short distances between facilities
- Cooperation and collaboration
- Well-established, traditional programs
- Recreation and competitive options
- A number of private/non-profit facilities

GROUP #3

- Existing services and personnel
- Services for all ages
- Willingness to change
- Safety and cleanliness
- Good community collaboration

GROUP #4

- People: volunteer, staff = dedicated and committed
- Quality/variety of programs

- Collaboration with community: schools, business sector
- Multi-use/accessible parks
- Model programs/after-schools programs

GROUP #5

- Community “feel”
- Active core of concerned citizens
- Small size makes coordination possible
- Present system had varied programs
- De-emphasis on competition for young children
- Low cost to users
- Existing facility locations
- Collaboration between city/schools
- Cooperative attitude
- A lot of facilities for our size
- Scholarships/inclusive

3. Identify the WEAKNESSES of the programs and facilities.

GROUP #1

- Unsafe and aging facilities
- Parking/transportation issues
- Lack of sufficient space/availability (24 hour indoor/outdoor)
- Staffing - recruiting and retaining
- Designated space for kids
- Shared space challenges
- Inability to reach critical mass (program sustainability)
- Duplicative organizations build to the same top needs

GROUP #2

- Lack of funding and land
- Redundancy and competition between agencies and organizations
- Established, traditional sports can overshadow interest in alternative sports
- Pressure to meet new program needs but no space to expand
- Accessibility issues
- Money for maintenance

GROUP #3

- Parking/traffic
- Aging facilities/lack of accessibility
- Lack of services for people with disabilities
- Duplication of programs/services
- Preventative maintenance

GROUP #4

- Aging facilities
- Lack of funding
- Limited facilities/parking issues
- Limited feeder programs for the high school

- Some turf-wars
- Playground safety
- Lack of proactive maintenance program

GROUP #5

- Programs - competing/overlapping
- Lack of services for special populations
- Lack of accessibility/inclusiveness
- Lack of facilities for school programs (Title IX)
- Aging/non-existing facilities
- Have not anticipated changing needs
- Diversity makes agreement/prioritizing more difficult
- Recreation: low funding priority
- No good pedestrian/bike access
- Programs are not competitive enough (older children/youth)
- No year-round pool/skate options
- No fitness/exercise facility
- No childcare - for adults to use facilities
- Signage for city parks - directive

- 4. If money and politics were not issues, what program modifications or additions would you include in activities offered by the City of Decatur? What facility modifications or additions would you include? Rank order each list where 1 is the highest priority.**

Session 4 asked citizens to develop two lists, one pertaining to facilities, the other related to the programmatic functions of the facilities. The groups were asked to be creative and not be limited by the constraints of funding, politics or other outside influences. Each group was then asked to prioritize those lists based on what they felt was the most important. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 are the listings of the top priorities determined during the work session. Each list reflects the order of importance that was assigned to the specific improvements. In many cases, the work groups determined some items to be of equal importance and therefore gave those items the same rank order.

Under the facility priorities, ranking both number one and number three was an indoor pool for competitive and recreation use. Biking, walking, nature and exercise trails were the second highest priority on the list. This was closely linked to the number four priority of city-wide sidewalk/bike path construction which tied with the development of an indoor/outdoor skate park. Tied for sixth place were the development of an outdoor track, renovations of the existing Decatur Recreation Center and maintenance and safety improvements in the parks.

The top five priorities identified under the programmatic heading included year-round swimming, fitness/wellness programs, a high quality maintenance program, expanded tennis programs and recreational youth softball. Others within the top ten were programs for programs for seniors and residents with disabilities.

5. How should the City of Decatur fund the recommendations that will be identified in this master plan? (Discussed as one group.)

- Bond referendum
- Corporate sponsorships
- Foundations (private and corporate)
- User fees
- Cross-organizational fundraising
- Grants (federal and state)
- Earmarked taxes dedicated to specific improvements
- Dedicated dollars for local penalties and fines (i.e. parking and speeding tickets)
- Soliciting organizations that target specific facility improvements (i.e. playgrounds)
- Major league sponsorships
- Special interest fundraising
- Utilization of an organization already equipped to handle fundraising (i.e. education foundation)
- Individual donations
- Large fundraising kick-off events (i.e. concerts with famous and local musical acts)

Public Meetings

Two open public meetings were held to gain the consensus of the general public. The first was held on November 15, 2001 at Westchester Elementary School; the second was held on December 12, 2001 at College Heights Elementary School. The meeting at Westchester Elementary School had an approximate attendance of 18 citizens. The primary concerns of residents at the Westchester meeting were for indoor/outdoor volleyball, a skate park and quality soccer fields. Residents felt the quality of parks in the metropolitan Atlanta region were poor in comparison to other regions of the country.

Other concerns were expressed regarding the public pools. The question was raised as to what other options exist for the public pools? Representatives at the meeting felt citizens would be willing to pay for higher-quality pools. There was a suggestion made that pools have a membership fee structure with certain times reserved for paying members. Others expressed a need to improve publicity about the pools to draw back residents who quit coming due to past problems. One problem mentioned was the high ratio of children to adults that once existed. New rules have limited the number to a ratio of 1:5 for kids under the age of five and 1:12 for kids six years and older. Parking was another problem that was discussed with both Glenlake and Ebster pools noted as having severe parking shortages.

Citizens at the Westchester public meeting also expressed the need to concentrate efforts for improvements. One member of the audience expressed the fact that the city contains a lot of activities; however, a concentrated effort is not being conducted to make them the best. This comment was followed by the need to improve maintenance practices in existing parks, especially where playgrounds are concerned. Other residents expressed the need for recreational and passive parks. A large portion of the audience present was in favor of a skate park. Currently, skaters in the city of Decatur do not have a public place to skate legally. Some private business owners allow skaters on their property on weekends and during weeknights, but at other times there is not a

facility to skate legally. Skate enthusiasts offered suggestions for potential skate park locations as well as funding and design elements that could be implemented.

The second public meeting, held on December 12, 2001 at College Heights Elementary School, was attended by approximately 36 citizens. Topics of discussion were very similar to those discussed in November. New topics included the need for dog parks in the city, a ropes course, bike and nature trails and facilities that are friendly to those with disabilities. Another citizen discussed the importance of aquatic programming. His concern was for the need to improve the city's outdoor pools and, in the future, explore the need for an indoor aquatic center. An extensive, structured aquatic program was viewed as an important component to recreation offerings in the community. It would also serve Decatur's growing senior population.

Summary of Public Input Findings

The completion of interviews, the steering committee workshop, and public meetings revealed many common themes and assisted in identifying critical issues in the community. The relation between top priorities in the workshop and those heard at the public meetings helps to create a basis upon which to formulate recommendations. Many of the identified needs are obtainable for a community like Decatur. Facilities such as a dog and skate park do not require extensive space or capital dollars for implementation. Other desires, such as aquatics, trails, and recreation center renovations, will require a greater commitment by the community. The opportunity that is presented by the partnering of public and private organizations for this master plan study is the ability to develop relationships and make better use of facilities that already exist.