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Developing a Youth Recreation Center:

SOME ORGANIZATIONAL TIPS

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Throughout rural, small town North Dakota, community leaders are becoming more concerned about sustaining the high quality of life the communities have to offer. Community leaders have learned to look more critically at the comparative quality of life in our communities. Throughout the 1960's and 1970's, the standard belief was that youth would graduate from the local high school and migrate to an urban center to get an education and a job.

Now there is some rethinking of this belief. In many instances young couples find cities and suburbs are not ideal places to raise children. Many moved back to their home community in North Dakota because they felt it was a superior place to raise children. This heightens the concern residents have about the quality of life for children growing up in small towns.

'The "Pros and Cons" of Youth Recreation Centers

There are many positive reasons for the development of a youth recreation center. First, the most obvious positive reason is the opportunity for youth recreation in the community context. This opportunity for recreation would affect the attachment to community in the long run. Second, the inducement to congregate will influence children away from vandalism. If children have something to do, they are off the streets and away from situations that lead to vandalism. Studies at Ohio State indicate most acts of vandalism occur on Thursday and Friday afternoons after school lets out. A third positive aspect is the child's security. Parents know that a child is in a well-managed, constructive setting. A final positive aspect is the opportunity for group learning. Some efforts in computerized education in group problem solving could be adopted by youth recreation centers.

Below are listed some of the most frequent reasons why communities reject the idea of a youth recreation center.

1. **The youth center will get used for only a couple of years, then the kids will get cars and take off.** There is some truth to this charge. Sociologists have noted the "founder cohort" effect in youth recreation. That means when a group of children pass the age of 15, they feel they have matured out of the center and have no interest in it. The younger children who might normally use the center feel little attachment to it and stay on the streets. They may even demand "their" own center.
2. **The youth center will become a hub for drug sales.** This might be more a fear induced by watching television than an actual problem. Also, past experience has shown that if drugs and alcohol are community problems, effective counseling can be provided through the youth center.

3. **The youth center will cost too much to build and maintain in the winter.** There is again some truth to this charge, especially on the problem of when the center should be open during the winter.
4. **If the schools were doing their jobs, we wouldn't need a youth center.** With the rising costs of educational and budget cutbacks, it may be asking too much for teachers and administrators to staff a youth recreation center or provide afternoon and evening supervision. They may have good intentions but they will eventually "burn out".
5. **Our children will become video game "junkies".** There has been much publicity about the bad effect of video games. But centers need not have such games.

"Plan It with Them — Not for Them"

In community development, when people follow a set procedure and involve a broad base of citizen participation, the results are usually positive. When things are done "for" communities or done without a popular base of support, conflicts and poor feelings arise in a community. It is not easy to build a broad base of support without a great deal of work and many hours of effort. Materials on people organization principles, meeting effectiveness, and organizational coordination are available from your county agent and state community resource development specialists. Below are listed some suggested steps on developing a youth center in your community. These steps rely heavily on social interaction and communication.

1. Critical Concern for Core Group

Some communities realize they have youth problems after acts of vandalism. By that time the community may be looking for positive means to "control" youth with a curfew. Some communities have spotted the need for youth recreation because of the results of a community attitude survey, a public hearing or the school's parent-teacher organization.

The source of the community awareness for youth recreation is not too important. What is important is the creation of a "core group" of interested parents and leaders who can act on the awareness. The first step is for elected officials, school personnel and others to develop a core interest group. It is suggested that eight to 10 adults initially develop the idea of a center and solicit input from parents, school personnel, businessmen, ministers and law enforcement personnel. The emphasis here is on the ideal functions of a youth center and on some organizational and management ideas. Avoid any talk about cost! Just try to piece together concepts of a youth center from the brainstorming sessions. The "core group" should attempt to finish their work in four to six weeks.

2. Consensus from Children

Focus attention for gaining input from the seventh through 10th grades. Older teens would be welcomed as members, but the seventh-10th grades would be the prime audience. Meet with them separately by grade if possible and explain how the parents and community leaders feel about a youth center in terms of what it can do in the community and what their expectations are for organization and management.

Discuss with the youth some of the problems mentioned above and how they might be solved. Try to keep the discussions open. Write the problems and solutions on newsprint and display them on the walls of the meeting room. Below on the left are some example problems. On the right are the positive youth solutions to the problem.

<u>PROBLEM</u>	<u>YOUTH SOLUTION TO PROBLEM</u>
A. Short time for use with "founders"	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bring in new kids when they reach seventh grade. 2. Let other youth groups like 4-H meet there. 3. Have "old-timers" come back when they turn 18.
B. Center becomes hub for drug sales	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Outlaw smoking and drug use in center. 2. Throw out offenders. 3. Sponsor drug education programs.
C. Center costs too much	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Let youth organize money-making projects (like junk car pickup, aluminum can center, odd jobs, etc.). 2. Membership fees and yearly membership drives. 3. Concessions and other money-making activities within the centers. 4. Match funds from civic groups or city government.
D. Too close to school and school supervision	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Select site that will be used by children, not a site that is convenient for some other reason. 2. Have parent advisory council and youth governing body. 3. Invite teachers to visit but don't expect them as chaperones. 4. Emphasize youth responsibility for operation and supervision.
E. Create video game "junkies"	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Let youth select type of activities. 2. Add microcomputers with games as well as educational programs.

Youth Center as Negotiated Ideal

After this process of negotiation, the core group should have a feeling for what the youth want as well

as parental and organizational expectations. Now is the time to "go public" and begin to solicit community support. At this point, the cost factor and siting problem become central. But some commitments from both youth and parents may have been developed by this time.

When costs are considered, look at two distinct phases: the developmental phase and the operational phase. During the developmental phase, civic groups can be requested to provide volunteer manpower and perhaps funds. At one time, federal money was available for building renovation, but those sources are now questionable. It may be best to rely on community organizations and fund raising drives to acquire a goal of several thousand dollars to develop the center.

Some Management Ideas

Good management practices are required during the operational phase. It has often been said that it is easier to build a church than it is to manage it from day to day. The same is true for operating a youth center. First, let youth organize a council responsible for management and rules enforcement. Second, let the youth collect membership fees to cover 50 percent or more of the operational costs. Ten dollars per year is not asking too much for membership. This may limit some "drop-ins" but it will provide a sound financial base. Third, set a goal that concessions should cover in operating expenses, say 10 percent. This would teach the children something about money management and marketing. Seek the remainder from civic groups or city government. If the center can pay a large portion of its costs, it might find funding from local donations more easily.

Choosing a Youth Center Site

Many a youth center has languished because it was "put" in a railroad depot, or a vacant run-down building or some site that no one really wanted. Parent advisors, youth groups and community leaders should select and evaluate several sites. The following evaluation format might be used. Each factor is given a preference score of 1 to 5.

<u>SITE</u>	<u>PREFERENCE SCORE</u>				
	<u>LOW</u>				<u>HIGH</u>
1. Operating costs	1	2	3	4	5
2. Building safety (age, presence of dangerous hazards)	1	2	3	4	5
3. Accessibility (doors, windows)	1	2	3	4	5
4. Proximity to youth population	1	2	3	4	5
5. Interior feasibility for redesign	1	2	3	4	5
6. Water and electricity	1	2	3	4	5
7. Type of heat (oil, coal, water)	1	2	3	4	5
8. Problems from neighbors	1	2	3	4	5
9. Availability through lease agreement	1	2	3	4	5
10. Capacity for youth group education	1	2	3	4	5

(Other factors could be added. This could also be done on the positive aspects of each site that could be used.

These and other criteria can be evaluated by members in each group. Each potential site can be evaluated and given a priority rating based upon consensus of the groups involved.

A Major Problem

This negotiation and planning process can move forward with the consensus of the parents, the children, and the community leaders. However, it can hit a snag if the homeowners in the immediate area dislike the idea of a youth center near their homes. If this occurs, some homeowners can be convinced of the merits of the center. The level of community concern and consensus is important for persuasion. If homeowner discontent continues, other lower priority sites may have to be selected.

Conclusion

Community leaders involved with retaining the quality of life in communities should consider the merits and long-term benefits of a community youth recreation center. Many community activities for youth are designed by parents. Children have little input into organized sports and many group activities. Young people should participate in the planning, design and fiscal management of their own youth centers. This experience base in cooperative planning will aid them later in life. It will teach them the social groundwork for participation in community development.

In terms of procedures, the following steps are suggested in initiating the concept of a youth recreation center.

1. Construct a core group (eight to 10 adults) composed of community leaders, elected officials, and school personnel. The function of this core group of leaders is to solicit comments and ideas from parents, teachers, businessmen, ministers and law enforcement personnel on the roles of the center in the community. New leaders could be drawn from these groups.
2. Solicit comments from youth (seventh to 10th grades) about what they prefer in the center, where they would like it located, and how much would they be willing to work themselves. Develop some youth leadership in this process.
3. Develop funding possibilities for the youth center. Let youth groups set goals for how much they could provide and the means for acquiring the funds. Solicit civic groups for volunteers and potential funds. Approach elected officials for additional financial help and point out how much of the developmental costs and maintenance costs will be provided by private sources.
4. Select several potential sites for youth centers. Use a formal evaluation system suggested above to place the sites in priority should neighborhood problems emerge.

Remember, citizen participation and involvement in the planning process is important for the long-run success of a youth recreation center. Let youth plan and be involved in the development of the center. This knowledge of the community development process will provide a firm foundation for effective community involvement wherever they may live in the future.