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City answers citizens' call to spruce up parks

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Study under way to develop citywide plan for leisure spaces
By Nelsy Rodriguez
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Patty Boffa's daughters, ages 10 and 14, dance at the community center in Cathedral City and play local league soccer. Her teenage son, however, wishes the city offered something for him - guitar lessons, for instance. City officials are working on that. They've already taken a swing at bringing more leisure-time opportunities to the city of 50,000.

That's because Boffa, a 19-year resident, and about 70 others, from kids to seniors, took part in six city-organized focus groups in May and found that:

- Reserving park space on weekends is so competitive that families have a hard time finding a spot for a barbecue.
- Seniors feel unsafe in areas that have litter, graffiti and abandoned shopping carts.
- The city needs a parks and recreation department to maintain public spaces and develop recreational opportunities.
- The city's most critical recreation need is a community sports complex that is near public schools but available to all.
- A public swimming pool is among the city's primary needs.

"The parks and recreation is nonexistent in our city," said Boffa. "Cathedral City has (a large) population of children, and for our city not to have some type of (recreational) program in place is just awful."

Master plan sought

The group's findings prompted city officials to hire a recreational consulting company to draw up a master plan for improving parks and recreation in Cathedral City.

On July 13, the City Council voted unanimously to spend \$12,501 to hire **PlaySafe** of Albuquerque, N.M., which is also creating a master plan for the Coachella Valley Recreation District.

By December, **PlaySafe** will deliver to the city a comprehensive 10-year plan with a five-year insert for more immediate improvements that can be made, complete with funding possibilities.

At this point, no one knows how much recreation improvements might cost or where the money would come from.

And the recommendations in the plan may not come cheap. **PlaySafe's** Craig Kelsey, who led the focus groups, said in an interview that plans typically call for cities to spend millions, not including long-term maintenance of facilities - something he's not sure Cathedral City can afford.

Acquiring park space

In 2004, the city adopted a Quimby Act ordinance, putting into effect a provision of a state law that allows cities to require that developers give land or payment for land to be used for more parks. Since then, the city has been buying park space to set aside for future recreation development.

Deputy City Manager Julie Baumer said the city has acquired:

- Seventeen acres next to James Workman Middle School.
- Twelve acres adjacent to the Salvation Army on Landau.
- Six acres in the Whitewater area.
- Nineteen acres by the railroad in the north end of town.
- Twenty-six acres formerly owned by the Palm Springs Cemetery District and adjacent to Rancho Mirage.
- Sixty-five acres in the western part of the Cove that will be used for trails and open space.

"The Council wants to acquire as much land now as possible with grants, exchanges and donations because they realize that even if the city does not now have the funds to develop all of them, these properties can be preserved for park use when funds do become available," Baumer said in an e-mail. "If these vacant lands are not saved now, they will never be available as parks for future generations."

What's available now

Currently, Cathedral City has four developed parks: Panorama and Century parks - which are maintained by a special assessment district composed of nearby residents - Second Street Park and Agua Caliente Park.

The city also contributes money to the Boys & Girls Club and the Senior Center, which offer daily recreational pastimes.

Other green spaces are Memorial Park, a small bit of land on Officer David Vasquez Drive; one acre at Town Square; and six-acre Patriot Park on Date Palm Drive next to Big League Dreams.

But residents have been saying for years that it's not enough, and parents say that with the city's large youth population, recreational activities are vital.

About 31 percent of Cathedral City residents are younger than 18, according to the 2000 Census.

"We need to provide activities for children to keep them involved in learning and in the community," Boffa said. "It just makes them more productive and better human beings."

Sprinklers shut off

In 2003, a \$1.4 million budget shortfall led the city to abolish its parks and recreation department and shut off sprinklers in the public parks.

In November 2004, two neighborhoods, Panorama and Century Park, created assessment districts, taking on half of the financial responsibility of maintaining the parks through taxes, according to previous reports. The city pays the other half.

Diane Hines, who has served on the city's Parks and Recreation Committee for 13 years, said the difference between having and not having a recreation department at City Hall is significant.

"When I first came on as a parks and rec commissioner (in 1988), we had a full, balanced city where we had a lot of different programs," Hines said. "We need to bring that back."

The next step

A team from **PlaySafe** will be working on just that until December.

Kelsey described the process as a thorough examination aimed at creating a plan that will give Cathedral City residents what they want and would use.

"We're going to get a sense of the pulse of what the citizens are valuing," he said.

Kelsey's intensive approach involves researching the history of the city, including its inception, government and funding sources. Kelsey said a **PlaySafe** team will also track a group of school-aged children through the years to measure the growth of a generation and how it will affect the population down the line. Kelsey's team will look at ethnicity, income levels and education.

"We need to be sensitive to all groups because there are some who rely much more heavily on public services," Kelsey said.

If accepted, the master plan will provide the key for creating a city full of recreation.

"What needs to drive it is a long-term plan that's not based on who's elected or what money is available at the time," Kelsey said. "(The plan) is a protection to the citizens that their money will be spent wisely."

Glance: FOCUS GROUPS

Cathedral City hosted six focus groups in May for citizens to chime in about parks and recreation in their city.

Special interest representatives, contractors, businesspeople, Realtors and other professionals

Citizens with or without children, interested individuals and seniors (two groups)

Middle school students

Seniors

Neighborhood groups