

Analysis Based on Biased Viewpoints

To the Editor:

In June, the Reston Association (RA) and Reston Community Center (RCC) Joint Task Force released the Brailsford and Dunlavey Final Market Feasibility Analysis for Indoor Recreation. We paid close to \$1,000 per page for this study, so let's make sure that we examine it and understand what it truly says. I would like to help the RA and RCC boards by providing an outsider's perspective.

I say an outsider's perspective as this is RA and RCC's report, not ours, not the community's. It is clear from statements in the document that B&D were being directed by RA and RCC and were in their service. They were answering questions RA and RCC posed and the question shapes the answer. We need to be conscious of that in reading this report, in listening at the district community input meetings and in interpreting the RCC survey that is coming in the fall. The question shapes the answer.

Like all consultants B&D start with a strategic analysis. Their flavor is a Strategic Asset Value Matrix, which looks at the gap between the aspiration and the existing capacity on 16 dimensions that RA and RCC provided them. They draw many conclusions in the report based on these gaps. However, they never state the following: of the 16 strategic dimensions there is not a single one where the gap between aspiration and existing capacity is significant. I am using the consultant's own definition of significant. There are only four where there is a moderate gap, eight where there is a minimal gap and four where there is no gap at all. So let's be clear the strategic statements are driven by marginal need.

The area of need that is real and voiced not just from RA/RCC but from others in the community is indoor tennis and aquatics. It has

been said that these needs started the process. The combined demand for tennis and aquatics in the report is less than 4 percent of the population (854 for tennis and 1,404 for swimming). To quote from the study: on page 35 it states "B&D estimates a participation level of approximately 850 for tennis within the Reston market, and an additional 1,000 for the extended market area. With limited indoor tennis facilities in the region, demand for tennis extends beyond the boundaries of Reston." Yet later in the financial part of the report, B&D make an assumption of 90 percent usage by Reston. Clearly, this assumption is simply a number of convenience, it is made up. The data in the report for the sports that were supposed to have driven this process (tennis and swimming) indicates that less than 50 percent of the usage will be Restonians.

So how do you justify a mega recreation center if tennis and aquatics don't do so. You find another large population of users for the facility, like fitness. B&D acknowledged at the June 1 presentation that they did not talk to representatives from existing fitness facilities in the area. If they had, they might have learned that there is a surplus of fitness facilities with all such facilities operating at significantly under capacity. The YMCA for example is currently operating at about 70 percent capacity and has seen a decline in membership in recent years. Additionally, fees for the proposed recreation center are comparable, if not more than, currently underutilized private facilities in the area.

I said earlier that the study was not the community's. The RA/RCC boards directed it and even the small amount of external input referenced is in question. Much is made of the focus group input. It

is far from representative. According to the report, focus groups were conducted with Reston Tennis Advisory Committee (RSTA), RCC and Community Aquatics, RA Parks and Planning, Reston Community Groups and Local Sports Groups. Almost all of the focus group participants represented RA, RCC, tennis or swimming. The only focus group that had representatives from a sport group other than tennis or swimming was the Local Sports Groups Focus Group. The sign-in sheet for that focus group shows that it included four swimming representatives, two members of RSTA and not a single representative from baseball, counter to what is stated in the report. Of the nine participants, six represented swimming and tennis and five of the six had already attended a focus group devoted to either tennis or swimming. So the sport that will be displaced at Brown's Chapel was not represented, in spite of what the report says.

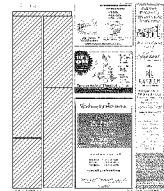
Again, I will return to the question shaping the answer because the report looks only at indoor recreation. The report selectively cites points from the 2005 Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan Update. It does not cite the general finding that residents "value the ease of access to parks and the protection of open space" and that trails and neighborhood and community parks are the highest rated facilities. The study also notes that the popularity of tennis is a declin-

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ing trend and that Reston has more than double the Fairfax County and national standard at 1 court for 2,000 people.

So in summary:

- ❖ the strategic gap between today and aspirations as presented in the report is far from significant, it is marginal
- ❖ the groups that you have represented as driving the process —



tennis and aquatics — have real needs but they are small and would not make up 50 percent of the core users in those activities

- ❖ the majority of the users, those in fitness and exercise, have alternatives available within the community and at a comparable price. It is not clear that you can or will attract them

- ❖ the input to the study was almost exclusively from groups and

individuals that had a biased viewpoint, it was as far from representative as you can get

- ❖ when placed in a larger context of overall recreation and with fuller community input parks and green space wins out.

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