



City of Litchfield Park Recreation Center *Community Assessment*

Executive Summary July 2007

**Prepared by the
Partnership for Community Development**



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Background

For many years, the Litchfield Park Recreation Center has provided recreational programs and services to the residents in and around Litchfield Park. While the Recreation Center (also known locally as “The Rec” or “Rec Center”) was state-of-the-art when it was originally constructed, the physical facility has not been significantly improved during the past forty years. In addition, the West Valley has grown dramatically since the Recreation Center was first established. Today, there are many other recreational facilities, both public and private, located within a few miles of Litchfield Park. As a result, local residents now have convenient access to a greater array of recreational program alternatives than when the Rec Center was first constructed.

In March 2006, the Litchfield Park City Council arranged for Ballard King and Associates to conduct a comprehensive financial and operational audit of the Litchfield Park Recreation Center and Swimming Pool. There had been concern among some City Council members that the Rec Center was serving fewer and fewer residents, while growing a larger and larger subsidy. Ballard King conducted research for a period of several months, and turned in its final report on August 15, 2006. That report identified opportunities to improve the operational efficiency of the Recreation Center. It also outlined several alternative management scenarios and suggested that the City of Litchfield clarify its future role in providing recreation services.

Note: This report contains anecdotal information based upon conversations with nearly 80 Litchfield Park residents. While an effort was made to include citizens from different neighborhoods and various age groups, participants in the focus groups and community meetings were not randomly selected from among all households in Litchfield Park. This means that the results of the focus groups and community meetings cannot be construed as representing the views of all Litchfield Park residents. Rather, these sessions were designed to solicit ideas from a broad cross-section of citizens, so that this valuable feedback from local residents could be considered by the City’s Recreation Subcommittee.

At the same time, the Recreation, Arts and Parks Commission (RAPCOM) of Litchfield Park conducted a survey of local residents to assess citizen satisfaction with existing recreational programs, parks, and facilities throughout the community, as well as to obtain general information about recreation interests. This survey was mailed to each household in Litchfield Park. The results of the citizen survey were also summarized in the final Ballard King audit report.

In the fall of 2006, the Litchfield City Council formed the Recreation Subcommittee to review and evaluate the audit and to formulate recommendations for the Recreation Center. The “Rec” Subcommittee, as it is also known, consists of three members: Councilwoman Marcie Ellis, Councilman Tim Blake, and Dave Schwake, RAPCOM Chair. Upon reviewing the results from the citizen survey and audit report, the Rec Subcommittee identified the need for more specific

information as to a) the priority the community put on having a Rec Center and b) if residents felt the Center was important, the kinds of programs that would interest and specifically serve Litchfield Park residents. That way, when the Recreation Subcommittee recommended whether to maintain, update, and/or rebuild the Center, the programs the citizens wanted would inform the Subcommittee as to the kind of facility necessary to deliver those programs.

In November 2007, the Rec Subcommittee sought the expertise of ASU's Partnership for Community Development to conduct a community assessment focused on the Litchfield Park Recreation Center. The Partnership is part of the College of Human Services at Arizona State University. Its mission is to assist local governments, non-profits, businesses, and educational agencies in addressing critical community needs. This report, prepared by ASU, documents the results of the City of Litchfield Park Recreation Center Community Assessment project.

Focus Group Sessions

ASU's Partnership for Community Development, on behalf of the City of Litchfield Park, initiated the Litchfield Park Recreation Center Community Assessment project in early 2007. The Rec Subcommittee agreed to utilize focus groups to obtain more in-depth, qualitative opinion data from community residents. Because the Rec Subcommittee felt strongly that it wanted to hear from all residents of Litchfield Park, they decided to hold focus group sessions by age group. In addition, the Subcommittee wanted to hear from residents who lived in all parts of Litchfield Park. In preparation for the focus group sessions, the Rec Subcommittee generated a comprehensive list of potential participants representing a cross section of community residents in terms of four age groupings and nine established neighborhood areas. In addition, announcements were placed in the local newspaper and information made available at the January 27, 2007, Annual Town Hall, encouraging any interested resident to add their name to the pool of potential focus group participants. All citizens were invited to add their names to the pool, excepting City Council and Commission members and their relatives. Thus, while not a scientifically random sample, the final list of 221 residents was created with the intent to solicit broad participation from the community as a whole.

The Rec Subcommittee provided the list of potential focus group participants to ASU, who contacted Litchfield Park residents and invited them to attend one of the eight scheduled focus group sessions. All sessions were held at the Litchfield Park Elementary School. Two sessions were arranged for each age group, as shown in the following schedule:

- 12-25 yrs: Tuesday, February 27 or Wednesday, March 7; evenings.
- 26-45 yrs: Thursday, February 22 or Tuesday, March 6; evenings.
- 46-65 yrs: Thursday, February 15 or Wednesday, February 28; evenings.
- 65+ years: Saturday, February 24; one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Each focus group session was conducted as a conversation with up to 12 residents. Sessions lasted from 1½ to 2 hours. Sessions were informal and designed to elicit more in-depth responses than are possible with a written survey. ASU facilitated these conversations based upon a set of question prompts that were developed with input from the Rec Subcommittee.

Residents were asked to share their responses to questions related to the following topics:

- Current Perceptions and Usage of the Rec Center
- Alternative Future Scenarios for the Rec Center
- Ideas for New Programs and Facility Improvements
- Financing Strategies

Community Meetings

In addition to the eight focus groups, two open community meetings were held to gather additional input from Litchfield Park residents. These sessions were scheduled for 9-10:30 a.m. and 1-2:30 p.m. on Saturday, March 10, 2007. The community meetings were also held at the Litchfield Park Elementary School.

Unlike the focus groups, these sessions were open to the general public. An announcement of these open community meetings was included in the local newspaper. In addition, the Rec Subcommittee members also publicized this opportunity to interested citizens, through phone calls, emails and other interactions.

Citizen Participation

In total, fifty-eight citizens participated in the eight focus groups and twenty-one residents attended the two open community meetings. Thus, a total of seventy-nine citizens participated in these community conversations about the Recreation Center. City staff subsequently compared the list of residents with the Rec Center's utilization records. It is interesting to note that approximately half of these residents had participated in Rec Center programs at one time or another, while the other half had not used the Rec Center or its programs at all (according to City records).

Despite valiant attempts to reach all neighborhoods and age groups, some neighborhoods and age groups were underrepresented in the focus groups and community meetings. Specifically, there were fewer participants in the age groups ranging from ages 12-25 and 26-45. Of the nine Litchfield Park neighborhoods identified for this project, participation from four of them (identified as Neighborhoods 1, 5, 6, and 9 on the map included in the Appendix of the full report) was lower than the other neighborhoods.

Interpreting Results

The results of this Community Assessment are based upon the conversations held with residents during the focus groups and community meetings. While this information is useful and richly detailed, caution is needed in interpreting the results as indicative of the opinions of every resident in Litchfield Park.

As noted above, the pool of potential focus group participants was generated from two sources: a) the Litchfield Park Recreation Subcommittee and b) respondents to notices that were posted in the *West Valley View* and other outlets. In addition, participation in the community meetings was open to any interested resident. Because participants in the focus groups and community meetings were not randomly selected from among all of the 2,500 (approximately) households in Litchfield Park, the results cannot be considered to be a statistically valid sample of the total population. In other words, the opinions expressed by the 79 citizens participating in the community assessment cannot be interpreted as representing the views of all Litchfield Park citizens. Nevertheless, the issues and concerns raised by participants were strikingly similar across all groups. This lends credibility to the notion that the common themes, if not held by all residents, are characteristic of a substantial number of Litchfield Park citizens.

The results of the focus groups and community meetings have provided valuable citizen feedback to the Recreation Subcommittee, which will consider this information in formulating recommendations to the City Council about policies and priorities for future recreation services. In addition, the focus group results can be used to guide the development of any scientifically valid community surveys that might be conducted in the future.

A summary of the results from the focus groups and community meetings is provided below. Information is first summarized in terms of general age group comments, followed by thematic statements that were common to all groups.

Age Group Responses

Conversations with local residents reveal that their current impression is that the Rec Center is used most frequently by the youngest (i.e., those under age 20) and the oldest (i.e., those over age 65) residents in Litchfield Park. Interests in recreational activities vary somewhat across the lifespan. These general trends as expressed by focus group participants are briefly summarized in the following table. (The Appendix in the full report contains a list of more specific comments about recreational needs and interests for each age group.)

Rec Center Usage and Interests by Age Group

Age Group	Usage of Rec Center	Recreational Interests
12-19*	<p>Used most frequently by young children during school breaks and summer. Many young teens were active in swimming and the swim team. However, usage drops off after age 16, when teens are able to drive and go outside the community for recreation.</p> <p><i>Note: *There were no participants between the ages of 20 and 26.</i></p>	<p>Swimming is the most important activity, especially for those involved in the swim team. Tennis, other team sports, and sport camps are also mentioned. Teens also noted that "a place to hang out would be nice".</p>
26-45	<p>Not used much by these adults, but their children use the facility for youth activities. Parents of young children may spend time at the pool while their children are swimming. This provides a valuable opportunity to socialize with other parents.</p>	<p>This group stressed the importance of having a safe place to drop off children. If good day care was available, more of them might work out at the Rec. Many in this age group are so busy with work and family that it is hard for them to find the time to exercise. Extended hours might serve this group, as well as activities geared to families. Recognize that some adults in this age group are single and interested in socializing and learning with other local residents.</p>
46-65	<p>Used less frequently by this age group. Most residents in this group used the facility when their own children, many of whom are now grown, were young. Parents of teenagers may still support youth competitive sports at the Rec Center. A few adults in this age group currently participate in water therapy.</p>	<p>Most in this age group are still actively working and have limited free time for exercise. Extended hours might serve this group. These residents were also interested in activities that promote social interaction across generations and foster lifelong learning.</p>
65+	<p>Used more frequently by this age group, especially those participating in swimming and water therapy.</p>	<p>Many in this group value lap swimming and would benefit from more water therapy programs. They are also interested in having a place to meet with other older adults for "senior center" activities such as card games, socializing, and lifelong learning. Those residents with limited mobility would like to see pool improvements that make it easier to get in and out of the water.</p>

Common Themes

Residents participating in the focus groups and community meetings, whether actively using the Rec Center or not, were virtually unanimous in their sense that the Rec Center is of central importance to Litchfield Park. Impressions of the current facility and services, as well as their ideas about future programs were similar among all the age groups. No specific preferences by specific neighborhood were identified.

Following are the key findings and other observations that emerged from these community conversations. These statements reflect the general opinions of the majority — but not necessarily *all* — of the 79 participants in the Community Assessment. For further explanation of these comments, as well as identification of any dissenting points of view, please refer to the full document.

Key Findings

- The majority of respondents would like to see the Rec Center re-conceptualized as a multi-generational Community Center, and perhaps renamed to reflect its importance to Litchfield Park.
- Those residents who have used the Rec Center consider the current facility to be outdated, undersized and unattractive. The pool, exercise room and restrooms/showers were most often cited as needing improvement.
- The majority of participants think that the Rec Center should be upgraded and expanded, but without losing its small-town character.
- Virtually all respondents view the Rec Center as an important symbol of the Litchfield Park community.
- The majority of participants want the Rec Center to remain downtown.
- Most respondents think there is a need for more community meeting space in Litchfield Park.
- Many residents are interested in greater opportunities for lifelong learning.
- Most indicated that Rec Center should receive some financial support from the City.

Additional Observations

- Most respondents had high regard for the Rec Center's current programs and special events.
- The vast majority of participants see the pool as a vital part of the Rec Center, and emphasized its importance for the youth competitive swimming programs.
- Those who have participated in Rec Center programs felt that the staff at the Rec Center have been a tremendous asset.
- Most residents believe that the Rec Center does not presently serve the entire community. The overall impression is that it is predominantly used by the youngest and oldest residents, but not by most residents aged 20-65.
- The majority of participants want to see the Rec Center continue — whether they use the current facility or not.
- According to the majority of participants, maintaining the status quo is not a viable option.
- Many residents questioned the value of the preschool program at the Rec Center.
- Many respondents expressed tentative support for new funding to improve the Rec Center.
- Residents suggested that the Library building might provide an opportunity to expand the Rec Center.

Summary

The common themes that emerged from this Community Assessment of nearly 80 residents reveal that the Rec Center is important to many residents in Litchfield Park, and has played a key role, especially for the youth, in the community. However, participants believe that the current facility is outdated and in dire need of improvement. They would like to see improvements to enhance the pool and upgrade the exercise room and restrooms/showers. In addition, residents expressed a desire for more community meeting space and opportunities to promote lifelong learning. In this regard, they thought that if the adjoining County Library moves, this building would provide an excellent opportunity to augment the Rec Center facilities. **Ultimately, many would like to see the Rec Center re-conceptualized, and perhaps renamed, as a multi-generational Community Center in an updated facility that can respond to the community as a whole.**

While residents expressed a desire for new improvements, they seemed acutely aware that any major renovations will be expensive and may require new sources of funding. Many residents expressed tentative support for financing that would make these desired Rec Center improvements possible.

In summary, residents expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas with the City Council. Many participants thought that the next steps would be for the Council to develop more specific alternative conceptual designs and cost estimates for the Litchfield Park Recreation Center. From this analysis, the City might identify a final set of 3-5 improvement options for the Rec Center, along with pros and cons for each alternative, as well as funding implications. This information could then be presented back to the community for further review and comment. Many of the residents who participated in the Litchfield Park Recreation Center Community Assessment offered to assist the Council in their further exploration of alternative ways to meet the community's future recreation needs.