

Residents: Community center should reflect neighborhood

Those at brainstorming session voice wish list for Good Hope facility

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Fifty people met in the Good Hope Community Center's gymnasium recently to answer a question posed by the Montgomery County Recreation Department: If you could redesign the center, what would you do?

The answers came in a burst of brainstorming at the public forum May 8.

Among the multiple pages of suggestions were recommendations for bike trails, tennis instruction, a police substation, exercise classes, a multipurpose sports-floor in the gym and programs for seniors and children, as well as for seniors and children together.

"We believe the programs at Good Hope should meet the needs of all segments of the community," said Adrienne Lees, speaking on behalf of the Greater Colesville Citizens Association.

All of the ideas will be culled and considered as the department prepares to make recommendations to County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) for his 2009-2014 capital improvement budget, which goes before the County Council in May 2008.

Department officials are holding similar meetings at the seven other community centers this month. Engineers, architects and site planners already have inspected the community centers at least once and made initial recommendations for renovations, said Jeffrey K. Bourne, the recreation department's chief of the community service division and the forum's moderator.



Naomi Brookner/The Gazette

Eight-year-old Alexander Wilson shows his parents, Yvonne and Ted Wilson, the Japanese teacup he made for the art show.



A first draft of those recommendations was given to residents at the forum, and a preliminary report will be presented in June, he added.

Good Hope Community Center, located on Good Hope Road south of Briggs Chaney Road, was designed in the mid-1970s. It was staffed by recreation department employees and offered programs and classes to the community until about five years ago, when budgets cuts led to the removal of staff. Today, the center is used primarily by the Police Activities League, which has been running after-school and summer programs at the center since 1997. The facility currently includes a gymnasium, kitchen, several classrooms and a social hall, as well as baseball fields and tennis courts outside.

“Any improvements made to the facility will obviously help the program,” Officer Pete Clark of PAL said following the forum.

Renovations also would encourage greater use among residents, many of whom feel the center is exclusively for PAL.

“We would like anything that makes the center welcoming to the neighborhood,” said Delores Holland, who lives on nearby Farmcrest Court.

The initial recommendations suggested for Good Hope by professionals included a weight and exercise room, an additional classroom, locker rooms and an expanded lobby and gym, which is currently 3,100-square feet. A regulation basketball court, by comparison, is 4,700 square feet.

“It’s a great gym for kids, it’s great for old guys like me,” Bourne said, “but for all those people in between, it’s not so good.”

But there are challenges to the proposal. Good Hope lies in the Upper Paint Branch stream protection area, Bourne said, meaning expansion of the center may have to be upward instead of outward, increasing costs.

No order of repairs for the community centers has been established, Bourne said. Priority will be assigned based on a center’s existing condition and community and programming needs, he said.

While the county has previously said that none of the centers will be closed, the priority ranking and current budget deficit had officials at the forum repeatedly cautioning against residents expecting overnight renovations.

“The journey is a marathon, not a sprint, through the budget process,” said Gabriel Albornoz, director of the Department of Recreation.

Lees understood, having tried for years to get a community center in White Oak. “I was very pleased with the enthusiasm and happy to see such a large crowd,” she said following the forum. “But it has to be tempered with reality.”

Many in attendance wore yellow buttons from Action In Montgomery, an advocacy group with members from 32 religious congregations in the county. Six days earlier, AIM

sponsored a meeting at Good Hope Union United Methodist Church across the street, where nearly 300 people asked the County Council to provide funding for community centers in this year's budget process as well as for next year's capital improvement budget.

The Rev. Jacqueline Jones-Smith, Good Hope's spiritual leader who attended both meetings, said that while county officials were trying to manage expectations at the public forum, the turnout by residents was encouraging.

"It shows the community's resolve to see the issue through," she said