

“Serve”-ing Two Masters Successfully

Tennis Center exemplifies how public-private partnerships can enhance recreation projects in a community

BY ANDREW PACK

In Mecklenburg County, N.C., residents enjoy multiple opportunities to be active and fit. This is thanks in large part to the county’s investment in public parks, recreation centers, greenways, and aquatic facilities.

Charlotte, the county seat, is routinely ranked on lists that document the fittest and healthiest cities, and in July was ranked 48th nationwide by WalletHub for its Entertainment and Recreational Facilities. Queens University of Charlotte is known for its educational opportunities, beautiful landscaping, and historic buildings, as well as for its facilities that serve multiple needs. The university’s Sports Complex and Conference Center is available to the university and the public, and hosts a variety of recreational and business events.

Last fall, Queens officially opened an additional facility that, like the Sports Complex and



A VIEW OF THE REAR OF THE \$1.7-MILLION, 6,200-SQUARE-FOOT QUEENS UNIVERSITY TENNIS CENTER AT MARION DIEHL PARK UNDER CONSTRUCTION.



THE QUEENS UNIVERSITY TENNIS CENTER AT MARION DIEHL PARK, SHOWN IN A DESIGN RENDERING.

Conference Center, was made possible through a public-private partnership with Mecklenburg County. The \$1.7-million, 6,200-square-foot Tennis Center at Marion Diehl Park blends the needs of student athletes with recreational tennis players in the community, and provides a shared, multi-functional event space for community meetings, gala events, and children's camps.

"This design collaboration is an innovative integration between the public and private sectors within a set budget and through strong management," says Architect Project Manager David Welling of Woolpert, the firm that has been guiding the design and construction of the project since 2016. "This building is designed to be a multi-functional workhorse that can be used for university gatherings and community meetings."

SHARING THE SPACE

Public-private partnerships can be an effective way to share the cost of a facility that will ultimately benefit each partner by creating event space or expanding recreational needs for a community. Both partners share design decisions to meet their needs, the planned functions for the facility, and the budget. Effective public-private partnerships result only if both partners collaborate on all aspects of the project, share design goals, and communicate issues openly and clearly with stakeholders.

The tennis center was designed to accommodate different uses at different times, and to be accessible to both the county and the university. Students can utilize the showers and locker rooms of the field house for spring games and practices, school teams can store equipment at the site year-round, and the public can use the community meeting space throughout the year. Both partners also plan to share office space and classroom space in the future.

The facility must be able to handle moisture issues created by student locker rooms and showers, retain a formal appearance suitable for galas, and be consistently multi-functional in order to host informal community gatherings.

To accommodate these varied usages, the design effectively splits the space into two wings. The west wing holds utilitarian functions, such as locker rooms, showers, and public restrooms, while the east wing has more upscale finishes. The east wing is designed for community use, with a technologi-

cally advanced meeting room, a warming pantry for catered events, and space for future classrooms.

A breezeway connects the wings and leads to an exterior concrete patio and lawn, where there is additional space for tables and tents. That space also allows for the potential expansion of the community room.

"Depending on the way furniture is set up, the community room can hold 25 to 80 people," Welling says.

Three sides have floor-to-ceiling glass and provide unobstructed views of the university's nearby championship tennis courts. This option to view outdoor activities in climate-controlled comfort has become increasingly popular in regions such as Charlotte, where excessive heat can limit spectators' enjoyment.



THIS BREEZEWAY CONNECTS THE EAST AND WEST WINGS OF THE TENNIS CENTER.

Wide entryways allow access for equipment or collateral needed to stage community events and increase internal flow. To meet the varied energy needs, the HVAC systems for the wing used by students can be shut down during school breaks and over the summer without affecting the year-round public use of the community room.



FLOOR-TO-CEILING WINDOWS ALLOW FOR VIEWING MATCHES AT THE TENNIS COURTS IN CLIMATE-CONTROLLED COMFORT.

KEYS TO SUCCESS FOR A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

Public-sector champion: It helps to have a recognized public figure who can serve as spokesman and advocate for the project.

Statutory environment: A statutory foundation helps the implementation of each partnership.

Public sector's organized structure: The public sector should have a dedicated team involved from conceptualization to negotiation through final monitoring of the execution of the partnership.

Detailed contract or business plan: There should be a description of the responsibilities, risks, and benefits for each partner and a clearly defined method for dispute resolution.

Clearly defined revenue stream: Even if one partner provides all the funding for capital improvements, there must be an identified revenue stream to retire debt, and must be reasonably assured for the length of the partnership.

Stakeholder support: Because the project will affect more than just those who are part of the public or private partners, it's important to communicate openly with all groups that may have an opinion about the partnership.

Pick your partner carefully: The best value in a partnership is critical to maintaining a long-term successful partnership.

SOURCE: *The National Council for Public-Private Partnerships*

The shared project also affected the budget, as cost-effective ideas were sought to appeal to public and private parties, both separately and together. For example, the athletic calendar and team sizes were considered during the design process to limit redundancies, and a single shower was installed for each gender rather than each team. These resulted in savings that could be transferred to the public side of the project, allowing for more community-room perks and thereby increasing the commercial value of the rental space.

COMMUNICATION KEY TO COLLABORATION

Welling says public-private partnerships for projects, such as the tennis center, work most effectively when partners discuss and execute design decisions that meet both of their needs, the planned functions for the facility, and the budget.

"There were open communication lines with the partners," Welling says. "From the very beginning, representatives from both sides were in every meeting. Both sides were pretty well invested in making the project a success."

Charles G. Snow, AIA, is the project manager for asset and facility management for Mecklenburg County. He agrees with Welling, adding that "we focused on transparency so neither party would be surprised or disappointed with outcomes."

Increasing the number of representatives involved in project design can complicate decision-making, but the process was eased by the fact that the county and the university had worked together on the previous Sports Complex and Conference Center.

"Like in everything, you give in some, but collaboration means making sure everyone has input," Welling says. "One of the interesting parts of a public-private partnership is you have two owners, and that can be a lot of cooks in the kitchen."

SHARING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

According to the National Council for Public-Private Partnerships, stakeholder support is one of the keys to success to a public-private partnership. The group notes that a partnership affects stakeholders more than the employees or government officials. Openly communicating with stakeholders—such as residents, unions, media, and relevant interest groups—prevents misconceptions about the project and its value to the area.

Many communities have reported finding these partnerships to be a more viable way to complete large projects that establish a valuable recreation or public gathering resource for residents.

"It's a great way to introduce infrastructure into an area," Welling says. "Without the part-

nership, one side or the other may not have the means to cost-effectively envision and accomplish the project.”

He adds that working together allows both partners to reach their individual goals even with limitations, such as being landlocked.

Troy Luttman, associate vice president for design and construction at Queens University, credits participation in the partnership to a “great president” who envisioned the possibilities and carried them out over the years. He says the university would never have had enough land to develop the types of facilities that benefit the students.

“Without the partnership, we simply wouldn’t have had field-hockey fields or tennis courts,” Luttman says.

Snow lauds the county for the benefits.

“The project leveraged money from both entities and achieved a better result in the building and site work,” Snow says. “The sharing of spaces, particularly the community room for special events, is another benefit.”

It was noted that lesser-known, private entities also gain value and visibility through public-private partnerships by bolstering public relations and showing a willingness to become invested in the community. This type of benefit becomes pronounced in an engaged and active community like Mecklenburg County.

“This successful public-private partnership will serve as a positive model for future opportunities,” Snow says. **PRB**

Andrew Pack, PLA, ASLA, provides senior architectural experience and mentoring, and acts as a liaison between Woolpert and its clients, fostering client relationships marked by trust, respect, and transparency, in some cases working with clients for more than 20 years. His expertise includes parks and recreation and resort and urban projects, in addition to master planning and architectural projects for universities. He is a member of American Society of Landscape Architects and North Carolina Recreation and Park Association.

To comment on this article, visit
ParksAndRecBusiness.com



OVER 350 PRODUCTS
TO FIT YOUR LIFESTYLE



www.landpride.com



TASK. TASK. DONE!

You can trust Land Pride implements to complete task after task with the reliability and performance you demand. Whether your tasks are your hobby or your job, Land Pride will be your trusted companion.

Snow removal tasks are covered by our full line of Snow Tools ranging from 48" to 12' widths and rated for 18 to 180 HP tractors. Whether you are a contractor removing snow from parking lots and walking paths or a homeowner cleaning your driveway, we build a snow tool that is just right for you.

Visit landpride.com today to find the product matched to your tractor or to locate your local authorized dealer.

Lp CONSISTENTLY LEADING THE WAY...