

Learning how: Wendy Zeidman of Farmington Hills tries a few steps with a friend, Sue Allison, also of Farmington Hills.



STAFF PHOTO BY SHARON L. MASON

Getting with programs

Center's role examined

By BILL COULTANT
STAFF WRITER

Hard times and an uncertain role have left the Farmington Community Center with an unsettled future.

The center, housed in the historic Longacre house on Farmington Road in Farmington Hills, has had trouble filling programs and keeping afloat financially in recent years.

Former Hills Mayor Ben Marks has taken over as interim director for \$1 a year after the board cut the \$32,000 salary position of former director Rosalie DiGregorio.

But with the purchase of the Mercy Center, renamed to Farmington Hills Activities Center, on 11 Mile, the center has found even fewer takers for its programs. That, says Marks, will change once the center board re-examines its mission.

"Twenty-five years ago there was no (city) department of recreation, no senior services center and no YMCA," Marks said. "This (center) was one of the great features of the township."

But that was 1968. Since

then, many of the programs the center used to have are either duplicates of others or were run during times that were inconvenient to most people. In addition, the building, which dates back to 1869 with a major addition in 1915, has needed extensive work.

When he was mayor in 1987, Marks was able to leverage about \$200,000 for physical improvements. And the center received \$4,000 from F & M recently. But even though he is upbest, Marks admits the center will have to do better at designing programs that no one else has.

Small retreats for 20-30 people, ballet and tap dance, voice lessons, chess classes and wedding receptions are all uses that fit the center and have been successful, Marks said. But most programs are offered during the day, which limits attendance.

"We have to look at offering more in the 7-9 p.m. slot," he said.

Already, some of Marks' efforts have paid off. A computer

grant from IBM along with the addition of a part-time bookkeeper have helped and the center is now caught up with its bills. But how well the center negotiates during the coming months could be crucial.

"We're looking for the whole community to rally around it," said center board member and Hills city councilwoman Joanne Smith. "We want it to be viable for the long term."

The center board will meet in June to take stock and examine changes in the center's operation.

"We have some big concerns," said board member and Farmington Mayor Arnold Campbell. "We need to determine where the center is fulfilling a need. The hardest part will be developing a new role."

Campbell and Smith said that would be especially tough because the center is competing with a lot of other institutions that fill the same role.

"Ben is doing a fantastic job," Smith said. "But we have to have a plan for the long term."

Guild works sew needy kids have clothes

Thursdays you'll find them quietly working away in an upstairs room at the Farmington Community Center, turning material and thread into children's clothing.

The Mary Stoll Sewing Guild has been meeting for 25 years. "We're sewing for people who

really need it," said guild member Kay Towner of Farmington Hills.

The cloth is donated, but the guild members buy needles, thread and sewing notions out of their own pockets. The results can be amazing.

An outfit that would cost \$60-\$70 in a store, is complete, with better quality than many you would see at even higher prices.

The clothes aren't for sale though. They're given to the needy.



Stepping out: The Community Center is where dance instructor Elaine Kallio teaches beginning line dancing.

Private developer makes arena pitch

By BILL COULTANT
STAFF WRITER

The Farmington Hills City Council put the finishing touches on language for the Aug. 2 ballot proposal for a new ice arena only to have another last-minute alternative pitched at it.

Council unanimously adopted the proposal in time to go on the Aug. 2 primary ballot. But it seemed as though nothing could be simple for the planned \$6 million project.

No sooner had parks and recreation commissioners studied and then rejected the idea of going for an early renewal of the parks and rec millage to cover any possible shortfall for the arena as well as pay for a new swimming pool and other programs than a private developer pitched a plan to build the arena as a privately run enterprise.

"There has been too much effort and too many people involved to get to this point," said Councilman Aldo Vagnozzi.

Mayor Larry Lichtman, who chaired the special committee that studied the arena, said the

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Councilman Aldo Vagnozzi

timing of the proposal by Asmar Development Corp. of Farmington Hills was poor.

Lichtman said he has been in contact with Asmar and two other private companies for the past two years about building and operating an ice arena in the city. But until Asmar's proposed four-surface facility, there had been little serious interest by private parties in the undertaking.

"The timing is somewhat unfortunate in that we have to take action by Monday's meeting if we want to get a proposal on the ballot."

Robert Asmar, president of the company, said his firm had been looking into building an ice arena in the Farmington Hills/Novi area for the past four years, and would go on with the project even if the city planned to build its own arena.

"We have investors lined up,"

Asmar said.

Councilman Terry Sever asked that a three-member committee from the council meet with Asmar to discuss a private venture. Sever, Lichtman and Councilman Jon Grant along with City Manager Bill Costick will meet with the developer this week.

"I think that six months ago, all of the council members involved would have preferred to have this done privately," Sever said. "I think we have an obligation to pursue alternatives."

Sever said, and city attorney John Donohue confirmed, that even if voters OK a ballot proposal authorizing the sale of bonds to build the arena, it does not obligate the council to take that course. A better, private plan that came along "in June or July" would still be an option, he said.

Here's wording of ballot proposal

The ballot proposal for constructing an ice arena will appear on the Aug. 2 primary ballot.

The ballot question is:
"Shall the City of Farmington Hills, Oakland County, Michigan,

borrow a sum not to exceed Six Million Dollars (\$6,000,000) and issue its general obligation limited tax bonds, within the City Charter tax limit, in one or more series for the purpose of erecting, furnishing, equipping and devel-

oping the site for a new multipurpose ice arena to be located at Founders Sports Park.

SHOULD THIS PROPOSAL BE ADOPTED?

YES

NO

Retail projects in store for planners

Two large retail projects are on the agenda for a public hearing at 7:30 p.m. today, Thursday, May 19, at a meeting of the Farmington Hills Planning Commission in the City Council chamber.

One is to consider rezoning 12.41 acres of property on the north side of Northwestern Highway, east of Orchard Lake Road, for a Home Depot store. The other

public hearing is to consider rezoning 60.4 acres on the south side of Northwestern Highway, east of Orchard Lake Road, for a Kmart store.

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