

Hills officials study park needs, millage

BY WILLIAM COUTANT
STAFF WRITER

Although support for parks and recreation projects and facilities has been strong in Farmington Hills, city officials aren't taking anything for granted.

At a joint study session of the city council and parks and recreation commission Monday night, both groups reviewed past successful parks and recreation millage campaigns and future needs — including staffing concerns.

Voters have passed two parks and recreation millages, in June of 1986 for five years and in May of 1991 for eight years. Both millages were for a half-mill (.5). That millage rate would generate about \$1.5 million a year in revenue.

The millage and grant money it has attracted will total almost \$12 million over the life of the current millage. The city has purchased and developed natural and intensive recreational parks, bought part of the Mercy Center and launched a number of recreation programs.

But with more land and programs to maintain, and more staff to run the programs, selling the new millage could be tougher.

"The things we have to do will cost almost \$900,000 a year on a millage that has not passed," said former parks and recreation commissioner and current Councilman Jerry Ellis. "If it doesn't pass, we don't have money for those things without raising taxes."

Ellis was referring to costs of running the senior program, staff salaries, the decentralized youth program, debt on the William Costick Activities Center bond issue, the cost of property next to Founders Sports Park the city has agreed to buy, and other costs already approved.

Parks and Recreation Commission Vice Chairwoman Barbara McCann said those costs are a hard sell, especially when some utilities that weren't included in selling the last millage are being paid out of the money it generates.

"It really galls me to be paying salaries out of the millage," she said. "When we started, we led people to believe that it would be for facilities and land. Now it also pays for salaries, maintenance and programming."

The amount of the millage request and the term of the tax have yet to be determined, which is why several officials want public input and participation.

"Twice we've gone to the voters and twice we've carried out what we've said we'd do," said Mayor Aldo Vagnozzi, adding that because the city has done what it said it would do, voters continue to support the additional tax money.

And preliminary results of a November Master Plan Opinion Survey mailed to the approximately 35,000 residences in the city show that support for the city's parks and recreation programs are strong.

Dan Potter, director of special services, said a citizen satisfaction index (CSI) of 70 percent or better was a good indicator of success in any future millage proposal. The CSI is based on survey responses rating services as excellent or good.

As an example, of the 1,716 who have responded so far, 1,105 answered the category of recreational opportunities for children and 83 percent rated them as good or excellent. Only 15 percent (167) rated them as fair and 2 percent rated them as poor.

In eight of the 19 categories the response was lower than 70 percent on the CSI.

Potter cautioned that although approval was high in many categories (82 percent believe the city is doing a good or excellent job of maintaining the existing parks), the city could not count on a "slam dunk."

Councilwoman Nancy Bates suggested that in addition to the survey, focus groups be used to make sure the millage had what people really wanted.

"Often times we hear the same thing from four different people and think it's right," Bates said. "We think it's right. But it's from the same source. It's not what the public thinks."

While the survey results are favorable so far, those negative responses should be analyzed to see where the city can do a better job of meeting resident wishes, said Councilman Terry Sever.

Sever and others also said they believe the city must use its fields and facilities more efficiently and generate some if not all of the money needed to pay for them.

"The challenge is to make these facilities pay for themselves, with soccer and baseball tournaments," he said. "We're going to have to take a look at how to generate money."

The city has scheduled public hearings on the parks and recreation master plan beginning at 7:30 p.m. Jan. 15. Each of the four public hearings, ending with a Feb. 5 meeting, will be in the city council chambers and focus on a different quadrant of the city and its particular needs.

City Attorney John Donohue said legislation is pending that could severely limit city activities in even publicizing educational information about a proposed millage. He noted that a proposed millage can be considered a "renewal" rather than an increase as long as it is proposed at the same amount or lower.

In step



STAFF PHOTOS BY SHARON LEHMEYER



All toes: At top, Natalie Heise, 4, of Farmington Hills follows the instructor's lead while, above, instructor Denise Babinshi helps Margaux Zanetti, 3, of Farmington Hills stay in the ballet movement's first position. At left, clad in her tutu, Kristin Nagle, 4, practices her next steps.

Parks and rec commission to seek input from public

The Farmington Hills Parks and Recreation Commission is conducting a series of public hearings to get input to update the community's recreation and parks master plan.

The city's Parks and Recreation Master Plan and the public hearings give the community the opportunity to provide direction on operations and help plan future parks and recreation millage items. A master plan is also needed to secure state and federal grants.

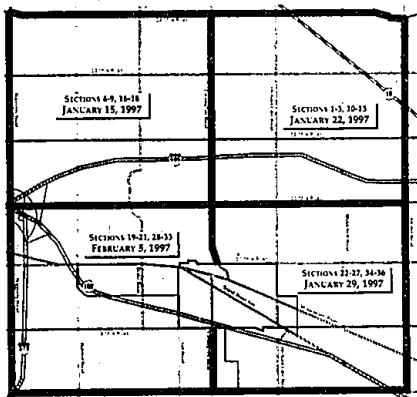
Since 1991, the city's department of special services has been awarded more than \$2.3 million in grant money. The millage has provided matching money in many cases and the plan has fulfilled grant requirements.

The plan has included development of youth athletic fields, nature trails and the purchase of the C wing of the Mercy Center, now the William Costick Activities Center for senior and teen activities.

Public hearings will focus on specific sections of the community at four separate meetings. The public hearings will begin at 7:30 p.m. beginning Jan. 15 at the city council chambers at Orchard Lake and 11 Mile.

■ On Jan. 15, residents from an area bordered by 11 Mile, Farmington, 14 Mile and Haggerty roads (Sections 4,5,6,7,8,9,15,17 and 18) are invited to attend.

■ On Jan. 22, residents from the area bordered by 11 Mile, Farmington, 14 Mile and Inkster (Sections 1,2,3,10,11,12,13,14



and 16) are invited to attend.

■ On Jan. 29, residents from an area bordered by 11 Mile, Inkster, Farmington and Eight Mile roads (Sections 22,23,24,25,26,27,34,35 and 36) are invited to attend.

■ On Feb. 5, residents from the area bordered by 11 Mile, Farmington and Haggerty roads (Sections 19,20,21,28,29,30,31,32 and 33) are invited to attend.

At the hearings, city staff members will present results of the community survey sent to

each residence in November. The survey results will be presented with a focus on the particular needs of the geographical regions.

Residents are encouraged to attend their regional public hearing, but can attend any or all of the hearings.

Any written comments should be sent to the Department of Special Services, 31555 11 Mile, Farmington Hills, 48336 or be faxed to (810) 473-9577. All correspondence will be forwarded to the commission.

YMCA HIGHLIGHTS

WHO, WHAT, WHERE...Y?

The third in the series of television shows began airing this week on Info Channel 12. Please mark your calendar. The Farmington Family YMCA will be providing more services to our community with a teen center and a second swimming pool for handicapped adults. The expanded facility is open and ready for use. The television show will focus on the expanded programs available.

MON AND TOT LUNCHEON SERIES

On Jan. 20, the YMCA will conduct the second in a series of luncheon seminars. This time, the focus will be on breast feeding. This series of work-

shops is sponsored by Betsford General Hospital.

LET'S TALK OVER LUNCH

This is a series of workshops sponsored by Sinai Hospital on all phases of Breast Cancer Treatment and Prevention. The second in the series will be conducted at 11:30 a.m. Wednesday, Jan. 22, in the community room of the YMCA. The focus will be "Preventative Measures for Breast Cancer." The speakers will be Dr. Michelle Rossmann, MD Imaging Director and Cis, and Emanuel N. Maisel, of the Women's Health Center. The cost is \$5 or \$10 depending on membership status.

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