

Design for



BARKER RINKER SEACAT

The challenges of creating recreation and community centers that appeal to the nation's increasingly multi-generational population can also present some fantastic opportunities.

By Craig Bouck

the Ages

Absent adequate planning, local officials throughout the United States will face a double-barreled “generational tsunami” that threatens to overwhelm community recreation facilities and services.

Much has been written about the aging of the nation's approximately 78 million baby boomers, the oldest of whom turn 62 this year. This tidal wave of boomers makes the pre-senior population (ages 55-64) the decade's fastest growing age group, projected to increase nearly 50 percent from 2000 to 2010.

Somewhat less attention has been focused on the “echo boomers,” the estimated 80 million or so children of the baby boomers, born roughly between 1982 and 1995 (the baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964).

Also known as “Generation Y,” or the millennials, the oldest of the echo boomers are now graduating from college and starting families of their own. With nearly one-third of the nation's population, the echo boomers are destined to replace baby boomers as the dominant population group of Americans.

For public park and recreation professionals and municipal officials across the country charged with designing, programming, and funding community recreation centers, planning for the onslaught of just one of these generations is formidable.

But satisfying the varied and increasing recreational demands of the aging baby boomers *and* their genetic offspring—not to mention the needs of

the current seniors ages 65 and older—is an unprecedented challenge.

Innovation Required

In most towns and cities, scarce taxpayer dollars simply will not permit construction of separate recreation centers to address the needs of each generational population. As international consulting firm Deloitte concluded in its “Serving the Aging Citizen” report last year, there is little doubt that governments will “face trade-offs, including how to provide services to both the very young and the very old without further straining their limited coffers.”

Private-sector health clubs and recreation centers will no doubt capture some of the more affluent baby and echo boomer markets. But there is no indication that these expanding generations will be any less vocal than present-day seniors and others in demanding their fair share of the public recreation dollar.

To meet the challenge, local recreation supervisors and staff must be creative and flexible, possessing a keen understanding of the needs and dynamics of the boomer, echo, and senior populations. They must figure out how to best allocate limited space to meet the frequently changing demands of a multi-generational customer base.

With limited budgets, agencies will find ways—such as creative facility design and innovative partnerships with outside groups—to operate community centers as effectively as possible without diminishing levels of service.

While the challenges are daunting, the future is not bleak. There is consid-



Multi-generational design is the focus for public park and recreation agencies today.



Park and recreation professionals are tasked with developing facilities and programming that offer something for all age groups.

erable evidence supporting the notion that generations don't require or want to be isolated in separate facilities. Instead, they want places where families can be together, as well as enjoy separate activities specifically designed for their age groups.

Generalizing about the aspirations and attitudes of entire generations is not an exact science. There will always be a significant number in each generation who defy the experts' characterization of who they are and how they should behave. Nevertheless, an understanding of a generation's basic attitudes and behaviors can provide recreation professionals the insight needed to make necessary facility design and programming changes.

Colorado Responds

In many cases, the boomer and echo generations are already affecting the design of recreation centers. A number of long-standing senior centers are being transformed or closed in favor of "multi-generational centers," designed to better accommodate the particular needs of the pre-senior baby boomers and their families.

Four years ago, officials closed a

long-time senior center in Littleton, Colo., in favor of constructing a new, larger recreation center catering to all ages, from toddler to senior.

"We anticipated being more efficient with using taxpayers' dollars while coming up with a center that was going to replace seniors' needs and also be used during those non-traditional times of evenings and weekends," says Andrew Pimental, CPRP, supervisor of Littleton's Douglas H. Buck Community Recreation Center, owned and operated by South Suburban Parks and Recreation.

"Some of the seniors were very upset, but most of them have adjusted very well to the new center and enjoy contact with younger generations. We still make sure they have their own spaces for most activities."

The trend toward multigenerational centers seems likely to accelerate. In addition to a need to more efficiently use limited resources, the move is also driven by a change in the conventional thinking about "senior" recreation.

For JoAnn Gould, South Suburban's manager of recreation, opening the Buck center showcased the agency's commitment to its citizens. "For years,"

says Gould, "we witnessed that the old building suited the needs of our seniors 60 and older but could not accommodate our younger, more active 50- to 60-year-old residents, and had nothing for families and children."

Lifestyle surveys consistently reveal that the soon-to-retire boomers seek more active recreation pursuits than the more "passive" activities favored by many of today's over-65 seniors.

More than two-thirds of the baby boomers surveyed by global marketing and consulting firm RoperASW for AARP said they expect to have "plenty of time" for recreation during retirement and that for most of them that meant regular health and fitness activities.

Baby boomers are getting older and facing more health concerns, but the majority of the AARP survey respondents revealed feeling several years younger than their actual age—and suggested they wanted to stay that way.

Working out and staying in shape through strength training and cardiovascular workouts were top priorities for the over-55 baby boomers in a lifestyle survey conducted for the Del Webb communities, a network of



planned active-adult-lifestyle neighborhoods across the United States. In this particular study, more than three-fourths of pre-seniors professed to working out at least three times a week.

Balance training programs such as Pilates, tai chi, and yoga are popular, with more than 50 percent of respondents saying they were “extremely important” to programming.

There is an obvious trend toward more active recreation activities compared with the traditional passive pursuits—card games, billiards, and arts and crafts—favored by many of today’s over-65 seniors. Nevertheless, many of the so-called passive activities remain popular with baby boomers, including online computer activities and continuing-education programs and wellness classes. Popular creative outlets for boomers include ceramics, painting, drawing, and wood-crafting.

Less is known about the recreation preferences of the echo boomers, who are now approximately 12-25 years old.

More racially diverse than previous generations, the echo boomers have been described as over-achieving team players who are much different from their more self-absorbed baby boomer parents. Technologically sophisticated, the multi-tasking echo boomers have led a programmed life of organized group activity pushed by parents who felt they needed structure.

How these particular traits translate into programming for recreation programs is uncertain. There is some indication that, despite their structured team-player reputation, the echo boomers particularly enjoy individual pursuits such as inline skating, mountain-biking, and weight-lifting.

Others contend the echo boomers have short attention spans, require ongoing praise, and are uncomfortable in unstructured environments, suggesting they are helpless in deciding what to do when left alone.

Two things for certain about this generation: There will be more of them than any other generation, and they are beginning to have children of their own.

In Design: Embracing Diversity

In coping with a multi-generational world, Littleton’s Buck center’s Pimental and others stress the importance of hiring a well-trained diverse staff capable of working with people of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. They must be able to manage and help create the innovative programming demanded by a multi-generational customer base.

Baby boomers are interested in wellness programs, personal trainers, and a variety of fitness activities and equipment specifically designed for their age group. To meet the needs of a multi-generational audience, modern community recreation centers offer a dizzying array of activities, including aquatic fitness programs, martial arts, spinning, Pilates, yoga, tai chi, strength training for all ages, balance training, indoor climbing, and fitness dancing.

These activities compete for space with computer classes and other ongo-

ing education programs, as well as more traditional pursuits such as basketball, volleyball, and arts programming.

And while designing recreation centers to accommodate the varied demands of all ages under one roof is a challenge, it is also an exciting opportunity to incorporate some innovative ideas that have only recently surfaced.

For instance, among the most popular features at Littleton’s center are the cabanas: small, family-style changing rooms that include private showers and toilets. This privacy is also appreciated by seniors and others, who, because of disabilities, injuries, and other reasons, are oftentimes uncomfortable in traditional public locker rooms.

Also popular in new recreation and community centers are fully equipped babysitting areas staffed by licensed child-care personnel. In addition to parents, the babysitting services are also used extensively by grandparents, an increasing number of whom have sole responsibility for their grandchildren.

Grandparents and parents also appreciate the walking tracks and “indoor playgrounds” that new centers are incorporating into their design, allowing continued activity and comfort during inclement weather.

Indoor climbing walls are appealing to adventurous boomers as well as to the younger set. And new designs in aquatic facilities have transformed the traditional eight-lane swimming pool into a water wonderland for all ages, offering a variety of strength and conditioning options as well as recreational enjoyment. Natatoriums include leisure pools with zero-depth entry, adventure slides, lap pools, warm-water therapy pools, whirlpools, and lazy rivers of water flowing at adjustable-current speeds.

At Littleton’s Buck center, natural daylight, indirect lighting, and special lighting controls create an even, glare-free light that is particularly accommodating to aging boomers and seniors. A large lobby with comfortable chairs and sofas encourages social interaction on-

all age groups, while the location of the reception desk minimizes staffing needs by allowing supervision of the fitness area as well as the community wing hallway.

In addition to computer rooms, the center's community wing includes a large, easily divided multi-purpose room with an informal performance stage, as well as a commercial kitchen for senior lunches, banquets, and other special occasions.

Maximizing Resources

While they eliminate the costly alternative of building separate facilities for various age groups, these family-oriented community centers don't come cheap. The 54,000-square-foot Buck center, for example, cost \$10 million to build in 2005, excluding land and fees. The center's user fees pay approximately 75 percent to 80 percent of annual operating costs, with the rest coming

from other sources.

With limited budgets, it is imperative that public park and recreation agencies be aggressive—and creative—in seeking additional funding assistance, exploring partnerships with nonprofit and community organizations, health groups, schools, and even private health clubs.

Facility designs that maximize the efficient use of space and reduce rising energy costs should also be a priority. Generally open day and night, seven days a week, recreation centers consume enormous amounts of energy. By spending a little more initially on energy-efficient green building, recreation centers can cut their ongoing, long-term energy costs by 35 percent or more.

The aging baby boomers and their children, the echo boomers, present a considerable challenge to public park and recreation professionals and municipal decision-makers. But the two

generations' increasing focus on family offers an opportunity to meet their recreation and fitness needs with thoughtfully designed and well-managed multi-generational community centers.

Park and recreation professionals should take the lead in educating local leaders, citizens, and others about the numerous health and cost benefits that family-oriented multi-generational community centers can provide for all age groups. By helping to reduce rates of childhood obesity, type-2 diabetes, and stress-related heart ailments, these centers are invaluable assets that deserve widespread support.

Multi-generational facilities, says South Suburban's Gould, define a community's quality of life, who they are, and what they want to be. "[The Buck center]," she says, "is a vital piece of creating a community that is a great place to live, work, and play." **P&R**

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