

# **Community Center at Symmes**

## **Report of the Symmes Advisory Committee Public Use Working Group**

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## **The Process**

There is a spectrum of needs in the Town that might best be met (perhaps can only be met) by a multi-function community center. The town-wide Symmes survey data represents support for the components of a multi-use community center in three of the four use categories: Public, Commercial and Medical. When taken collectively these suggestions, ranging from a swimming pool to a Tot Stop to physical therapy, represent between 30% and 40% of the total. In the first public workshop, suggestions from the community in support of components of a multi-use community center accounted for about one third of the total comments.

With these statistics in mind, the Public Use Working Group included variations on the community center theme in an evaluation exercise. All four Working Groups were represented in this evaluation exercise, which used the Criteria for Use Evaluation categories of need, fit and feasibility. The results clearly showed two standout high outcomes: the scenic vista park and the core community center concept. The indoor pool (and the affiliated "recreation center" concept) as well as the the art/cultural center concept also scored high, reflecting a strong "need" component.

As a result of the evaluation exercise, the Working Group developed a Public Use Priorities statement, recommending four public uses to be pursued at the Symmes site: a scenic vista park, walking trails, a memorial park/columbarium and a multi-use community center. Members of the Public Use Working Group and the CATS (Coalition for a Treehouse at Symmes) group set to work collecting information on the priority uses, primarily on community centers and columbaria. The information gathering process involved document collection, interviews and site visits for several existing facilities and organizations. All of this material has now been assembled at <ftp://sacpuwg:sacpuwg@symmesarlington.org/puwg/> .

Over a series of meetings, the Working Group further defined the multi-use community center concept, investigating variations on the theme, and defining the programming and physical facility to best match the community's needs. Many potential components were evaluated to form a cohesive concept. These included: multi-use meeting and event rooms, kitchen/catering facilities, space for display of art & education exhibits, an aquatic center with one or more indoor pools offering both recreational and rehabilitation/physical therapy opportunities, parent-supervised play areas (a "Tot-Stop"-like facility), after school care, an indoor track and fitness center, a well-equipped theater or other performance space, and activities for active seniors and teens.

## **Financial Considerations**

For a community center at Symmes to become a viable option for the Town, there must be a thorough examination of a range of possible forms of financing, ownership and operation of the facility. Public versus private, for-profit versus non-profit, and public/private partnerships will all need to be considered. Options include the possibility of establishing a local not-for-profit and recruiting energized board members to raise funding, the potential involvement of other municipal agencies (Council on Aging, Youth Services, Recreation Department) and state funding sources.

We are proposing a community center with a total area of 60,000 square feet. Based on the VHB consultant team's cost estimates of between \$150 and \$200 per square foot for construction, we estimate that the facility could be built for between \$10 and \$12 million. Funding options to be explored for the construction are grants, linkage to other development on the site, private gifts, and a capital campaign.

Experience in other communities indicates that, once constructed, a multi-purpose community center can be self-sustaining. Since many forms of funding are only available for capital costs, this is a critical factor. The Working Group's research shows that the Williamsburg, Virginia Community Center and the Newton JCC are 95% self-supporting, although both of these facilities were constructed with funds raised through local capital campaigns.

The Symmes redevelopment may present an opportunity not available elsewhere in Arlington to create a community center. Significant citizen leadership will be required. Judging by the comments and inquiries the committee has received, there are many residents interested in working toward this goal. The Working Group suggests that professional guidance will also be required to help the Town fully evaluate this opportunity in the timeframe of the Symmes planning process.

The success of the Whittemore-Robbins House and the Central School projects, which have successfully returned revenues to the town, should be considered models of Arlington's ability to acquire funding and maintain public/private use facilities. If cost-cutting efforts, increased rental income and/or sale of parcels of the Symmes campus allow phasing of the community center's construction, the site could potentially be held for some period of time, while funds were raised.

## **Site Considerations**

The location of the community center on the Symmes site may have a significant impact on its use. Proximity to the proposed skyline park and natural wooded areas may be critical in order to create an environment welcoming to the community. In addition, the connection of the facility to any medical, commercial and residential development elsewhere on the site will also require careful consideration.

The Public Use Working Group has strong reservations about any large scale development of the lower portion of the Symmes site. The existing wooded area and the residential fabric of this section of Summer Street make this portion of the site highly sensitive to redevelopment.

## **Conclusion**

The purchase of the Symmes campus has provided an opportunity to create something unique and visionary for Arlington, a physical and symbolic focal point for the community--something we can be proud of over the entire century. The Public Use Working Group proposes that a successful community center at Symmes will: involve the community in every step of its formation, serve the public in a unique way, be well-suited to its setting and surrounding uses, and provide a well-integrated mix of uses that is greater than the sum of its parts. With vision, leadership and guidance, we believe that such an outcome is achievable.

## Proposed Program

The program below represents a community center concept that is the result of the Working Group's assimilation of the needs and desires of the community and our study of successful models. We envision a community center that would provide an all-weather, welcoming environment with amenities that would attract a broad cross-section of Arlingtonians. Although both preliminary and provisional, this program should provide a common starting vocabulary for comment on the community center concept from the public, the SAC, the ARB and the VHB consultant team.

Pools	14,000 sf
Gymnasium	9,000 sf
Locker Rooms	5,000 sf
Fitness/Wellness Equipment	2,400 sf
Aerobic/Dance	3,000 sf
Rehabilitation Suite	500 sf
Child Play Space*	5,000 sf
Child Care or After School*	4,000 sf
Baby-sitting	1,200 sf
Lounge	500 sf
Multipurpose Assembly	4,200 sf
Classrooms	1,200 sf
Dining	1,000 sf
Kitchen	500 sf
Administrative Offices	2,000 sf
Support	6,500 sf
TOTAL	60,000 sf

\*would also require adjacent outdoor space

**COMPARISON OF PROPOSED ARLINGTON COMMUNITY CENTER WITH OTHER PROTOTYPES**

<b>Use Component</b>	<b>Arlington Proposal</b>	<b>YMCA Proposal for Arlington</b>	<b>Newton YMCA</b>	<b>James City / Williamsburg</b>	<b>Oak Square YMCA</b>
Pool	14,000	14,000	9,000	15,000	8,500
Gymnasium	9,000	12,000	12,500	32,000	8,000
Locker Rooms	5,000	6,000	4,500	4,000	4,000
Fitness/Wellness	2,400	2,500	6,000	3,000	5,500
Aerobic/Dance	3,000				
Rehab Suite	500				
Child's Play Space	5,000				
Child Care/After School	4,000	3,500	1,000	1,000	2,500
Baby Sitting	1,200				
Lounge	500	2,000		4,500	1,000
Multipurpose Assembly	4,200		6,500	5,000	2,500
Classrooms	1,200			3,000	500
Dining	1,000				
Kitchen	500			500	500
Administration Offices	2,000	6,500	10,000	2,500	1,500
Support	6,500		6,500	15,000	4,000
<b>APPROX TOTAL</b>	<b>60,000</b>	<b>47,000</b>	<b>56,000</b>	<b>85,500</b>	<b>38,500</b>