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Report weighs park needs

An analysis of recreation for El Dorado Hills will help district create master plan.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer

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Returning to business after voters rejected El Dorado Hills incorporation, the Community Services District faces a full agenda and high expectations.

During a special meeting Tuesday, district directors took preliminary steps to create a facilities master plan, reviewing community needs and discussing visions for the district in 2020.

Residents who responded to surveys as part of the master plan process echoed some of the spirit that fueled the cityhood campaign. When it comes to parks and recreation, "they want unique, state-of-the-art facilities," said consultant Sharon McNamee, project manager with MIG, a Berkeley-based planning and design firm. "They have really high aspirations."

The community's needs and desires will form the basis for capital and program improvement plans, scheduled for presentation during a special board meeting Jan. 19.

"You're going to have to grow to serve the future population. That's a given," McNamee told the board.

Dianna Hillyer, district planning director, said the master plan will aid her in negotiating with local developers for park sites that meet district needs.

The district's population is expected to increase from about 33,000 to approximately 59,000 by 2020, states the community needs assessment report.

In a community survey of 400 randomly selected households, McNamee said, 75 percent reported using a park, recreation facility or program during the previous year.

The greatest use occurred among adults ages 30 to 49 and households with children. Residents ages 20 to 29 and 60 or older reported the least use.

The survey indicated 44 percent of El Dorado Hills households had taken part in a district recreation program during the year, compared with an average of 30 percent in most communities.

The community survey, along with responses to questionnaires circulated among youths and organized sports groups, and an inventory of district facilities show the community lacks sufficient outdoor basketball and tennis courts, as well as multipurpose recreation centers to meet existing demand.

By 2020, the report says, the district will need to add sports fields, outdoor basketball and tennis courts, a swimming pool, playgrounds, trails and recreation centers.

Board members expressed surprise at some of the findings.

Sports leagues, for example, lament a lack of playing fields, but the report found that the community has enough fields to meet current demand.

McNamee noted, however, that the inventory includes school playing fields, which may be inadequate because of poor maintenance and are in need "loving care," she said.

Director Justin Masters said a partnership with the schools in which the community services district would provide field maintenance has been suggested.

"The sports groups are pounding on us already to get the school fields under our maintenance agreement," he said.

Similarly, with the inclusion of school gyms, the inventory shows that El Dorado Hills has four more gyms than are now needed. But board President Joe Chinn said courts often aren't available for practice.

"I agree there's a disconnect," McNamee said. "You may have enough physical space, but you're not getting access to it."

McNamee said the needs assessment recommends that the district change its current standard of providing one gym per 20,000 residents to one per 7,000 residents. Even then, she said, the community would have one more gym than needed.

"The solution is not to build more gyms, but to get access to what you have," McNamee said.

Chinn said he thinks latent demand for courts exists, especially among teenagers and young adults who are not involved in organized sports but enjoy recreational play.

A geographic analysis of existing and planned parks shows four areas of the community would lack a neighborhood park within walking distance - a half-mile. The district also needs two sites, an additional 20 acres, for larger "village" parks.

Four planned community parks will meet anticipated needs in that category, the report says.

The inventory of parkland and open space includes private parks as well as trails and open space in areas such as the Serrano development.

Though the district owns only 1.5 miles of trails, General Manager Wayne Lowery said many trails in Serrano are open to the public. Of 800 acres of open space in the development, he said, 400 acres are required to have public access.

"You have an amazing amount of trails and open space, but not all are connected, and you don't have access to all of them," McNamee said.

Board President Chinn said the district needs a "grand vision" for its recreational facilities and should look beyond the region for models.

"Colorado has grand facilities," he said.

Board members agreed the district needs another community center and aquatics center. Some suggested a community center include facilities for theatrical performances. An indoor pool for lap swimming also could expand aquatics center use from seasonal to year-round.

McNamee encouraged directors to "dream that dream, and dream that building."

Once the master plan is developed, Lowery said, a study will be undertaken "so we can figure out how to afford it."

PARK LAND INVENTORY

* The El Dorado Hills Community Services District owns 362 acres of park land, including open space preserves, at about 40 sites.

* This park land would provide 5.37 acres per 1,000 residents when the community is fully developed.

* If more than 2,000 acres of private El Dorado Hills Homeowners Association open space is considered, the figure increases to 45 acres per 1,000 residents.

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