

Community Center Task Force

September 12, 2023

Tony Franklin called the meeting to order at 6:00. Present were Cassie Crimotich, Sharon Custer, Connie Dennis, Carl Dortch, Tony Franklin, Dave Hix, Darla Krejci, Anthony Law, Demarkius Medley, Maria Salsman, Adam Sampson and Jaclyn Smith-Esters. Ted Hoffman arrived late. Missing was Grael Mulata.

A motion was made by Cassie Crimotich to approve the minutes from the August 28, 2023 meeting. Seconded by Jaclyn Smith-Esters. Motion passed unanimously.

New task force member, Demarkius Medley, introduced himself. Demarkius stated he is a transplant to Galesburg so he is honored to be asked to represent in this big decision. He described his upbringing in the Southside of Chicago raised by a single mother with five kids. He credits a community center's afterschool program with saving his life. It was called SAFE and stood for St. Agatha's Family Empowerment. This program kept him busy after school and through field trips he was exposed to the culture and experiences Chicago had to offer. Demarkius explained how he tried to start his own afterschool program in collaboration with the Galesburg Youth Athletic Club, but he was hurt by accusations that the program was funded by drug money. He shared that the money actually came from a settlement with the church because members of his family experience abuse by clergy members. He was frustrated that he tried to make good of a bad situation only to be accused of something that wasn't true. He admitted he is suspicious of people who say they want a community center, but are actually "wolves in sheep's clothing." He does not want the city to continue to let the youth down.

Because the meeting was being held at the library and the library had to close at a certain time Chair Tony Franklin offered to move public comment to this part of the meeting so that everyone who wanted to speak would have the opportunity to speak. The public requested to keep public comment at the end of the meeting.

Chair Tony Franklin opened the floor to nominations for Vice Chair. Cassie Crimotich nominated Anthony Law. Connie Dennis seconded. Anthony Law accepted the nomination. Darla Krejci nominated Jaclyn Smith-Esters. Demarkius Medley seconded. Jaclyn Smith-Esters also accepted the nomination. The motion to close nominations was made by Adam Sampson and seconded by Connie Dennis. Motion passed. Ballots were collected and counted by Elizabeth Varner. Anthony Law was voted in as vice-chair. (Anthony Law – 7 votes, Jacklyn Smith-Esters – 5 votes.)

Elizabeth Varner asked if Demarkius Medley had been assigned a committee. The two committees with open positions were Adult/Seniors and Non-profit/Service organizations. Demarkius requested to be on the Adult/Senior committee.

Ted Hoffman arrived at 6:25.

The task force sub-committees gave their reports.

Maria Salsman presented for the Core Amenities committee (Maria Salsman, Connie Dennis & Sharon Custer). She reviewed the results of a survey they sent out to Galesburg Jr/Sr High School, Galesburg Christian School and Costa Catholic Academy. She only reported on answers from 7-12 grade. They received 240 responses so far and were receiving more. They also intend to send the survey to RAES. (See report)

Maria Salsman said some "chilling" take-aways were the number of students who requested a place to shower and a place to do their laundry. She also reported a respondents saying "I want a place that felt like home is supposed to feel like" and "I want an adult to talk to" Overall 180 of 250 respondents said they would go to a community center.

Cassie Crimotich asked if we could all get a copy of the results. Elizabeth Varner said she would create a google document drive where we could all access the report (and other reports and documents.) Connie Dennis said the enrollment in Galesburg Jr/Sr High School was 1250, so 250 responses was a good response rate.

Carl Dortch reported for the Youth/Teen committee (Adam Sampson, Carl Dortch & Graef Mulata.) He said only spoke to two kinds of people. He started with someone he thought was someone who wouldn't normally be asked. This was an acquaintance who has been in and out of the Mary Davis Home. Carl asked them about other residents of the MDH and what they did to be housed there. The answer was for things such as auto theft and burglary. When asked why they did these things it was because they didn't have these things and the only way they were going to get them was to take them. Carl said him realize that when someone does something bad you need to look at why they did what they did. Carl suggests the community center should have a club for kids to "turn their lives around." He suggested it could be in collaboration with Teen Court and service hours could be attending this club and they can talk to people with the same problems they have. Carl brought up the respondent from the survey who said a community center should feel like home, that at a community center a teen could find a "mom." He mentioned the Streak Dads and how wonderful that program was in the high school. He believes a mentorship program could be impactful.

The other group Carl talked to were athletes. This person would like someplace to "chill" and not have to do sports.

Adam Sampson, also from the Youth/Teen committee gave his report. He polled 46 13-18 year olds at the Y about what they would like to do in Galesburg. The responses included "a place to sit" like a lounge, a gaming center, and ping-pong and air hockey. He also polled 27 5-6th graders (age 10-12) from Lombard. They requested an indoor playground, apparatus to jump on like trampolines, rock climbing, outdoor turf areas, a lego trinket area and a gaming area.

It was discussed how there were a lot of ways to collect information and that they are all valid. Surveys were one way and talking directly to individuals was another way.

Tony Franklin reported for the Adult/Senior committee (Tony Franklin & Ted Hoffman). He visited the Oaks Senior Center and spoke to its director, Jenny. Jenny said the seniors at the Oaks were told they would have to share a room at a Community Center and they did not want to do that.

Tony went on to state that he thought this was a missed opportunity. He believes many young people do not have even one significant adult in their lives. They are looking for someone to talk to.

Ted Hoffman also on the Adult/Senior committee. He said he had difficulty finding seniors to talk to. He did speak to two people at the Oaks and they expressed a similar sentiment to what Tony heard. They don't want to share space. They like their space for their activities such as bingo, potlucks, lessons and classes. But they know the building is in bad shape, but they don't know where they would fit in at a community center. Other seniors he spoke with agree the youth of the community need a place to go, but they did not think they would go to a community center. He mentioned the Labor Day parade and how a lot of people were there which indicates that the community does come together for things and that there is great potential in that fact. He hopes to have more information by the next meeting.

Demarkius Medley asked if anyone had spoken to residents of the housing authority, such as Moon Towers and Mary Allen West.

Maria Salsman reported that she spoke to some older members after mass at St. Pat's and that they said they had free time and would love to share their knowledge and learn from the youth. They are looking forward to working together with the youth. They are lonely and they miss young people and their energy.

Jaclyn Smith-Esters said churches were a good place to ask people about the community center.

Tony Franklin said it was okay to work outside our assigned groups as we gather information and bring that information back to the task force.

Connie Dennis said she attended a class dinner and talked with her fellow classmates. They said they felt they had plenty to do between the Oaks, the VNA and the VFW, but that they were interested in volunteering at a community center. She said discussed how there used to be Reading Buddies at the schools and they would be interested in doing that again. She reported they said a community center was not someplace they needed to go, but they would utilize it for other purposes.

Jaclyn Smith-Esters reviewed the report submitted the Non-profits/Service organizations committee (Jaclyn Smith-Esters and Darla Krejci). (See report) Highlights included a breakdown of "needs" based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the organization in the community that address these needs. Organizations that meet basic needs might be better suited to be housed in a homeless/warming shelter. A community center would focus on higher level needs (belonging, esteem & self-fulfillment). Organizations that meet these needs would be good partners with a community center. The need for childcare services was mentioned in the report. The committee compiled data from 10 various needs assessments that had been done recently and compiled them into a binder for the task force members to review if they wanted. Jaclyn Smith-Esters encouraged everyone to look at the data that was already available and use it to find the "gaps." She listed some gaps they identified. The report also included a history of community centers and a list of what a community center does.

Tony Franklin reported for the Galesburg City Facilities committee (Tony Franklin, Cassie Crimotich and Dave Hix) He handed out the list of facilities owned by the city. He stressed that it is not a building, but the programs that are going to make a Community Center thrive. He reminded the group that we need to consider the sustainability and maintenance of a building for a plan to be successful. He wants to make the best investment without repeating what we already have. He asked if we could utilize or reutilize what is already owned. He said he was working on gathering budget and expenses of these facilities and would report that at our next meeting. He said all the information we gathered from the youth, seniors and non-profits was giving us direction. He acknowledged it was taking time, but anything of value takes time. He said this is the most excited he's been about the prospect of a Community Center.

Cassie Crimotich said she had compiled a list of empty/available buildings in the city. She also reiterated that she did not want to put the building before the programs. The programing is going to dictate where this project lands. And we need to figure out who is going to pay for it? She suggested we need to really understand what we need and the difference between needs and wants because given budgetary restraints we are not going to be able to do everything. She would get the list to Elizabeth to share on the google drive.

New Business – Chair Tony Franklin said he would like to organize trips to other community centers. He suggested centers in Quincy, Rock Island, Peoria, Bloomington and Davenport.

Demarkius said this is important to see what a community center can look like. He offered to drive interested parties in his van at his own cost. He also stated that kids sometimes know what they want, but might not know what they need. We, as adults, need to direct them to what they need. He stressed again that we need to poll/survey the people in housing.

Anthony Law agreed that we need to be inclusive. We need to work harder to hear those marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Demarkius suggested we put together a business plan. A business plan would answer a lot of the questions about costs.

Tony Franklin said visiting other community centers will also help answer questions about how they operate and the cost of operation. He wants us to look at the future and looking at other community centers will give us a better idea of what we can do.

Jaclyn Smith-Esters said we do not want to close the door on building a community center in phases. Others agreed because we don't know yet what we want.

Demarkius brought up the budget restriction of 2.5 million.

Chair Franklin suggested, for the sake of time, we move beyond that conversation. He said we should continue to work in our groups and try to visit some other community centers. He tasked us all to think about the benefits of a Community Center. He believes the benefits will outweigh the cost. He gave the example of a study on teen mothers that showed the cost of teen pregnancy to the community.

Demarkius continued to question the 2.5 million budget. Chair Franklin explained that it was discussed at the first meeting and many conversations have happened since then, but for now we haven't decided anything yet. He doesn't want to throw anything off the table at this point. As we brainstorm, we shouldn't be limited. We need to listen with our full attention and not defensively. We want a place where people will come. We need to think about what elements define a community center. He mentioned some of the definitions we already heard: it's a place to gather that is safe, a place to do activities. It needs to bring people together and break down the barriers that have divided the community for too long. He wants people to understand that we are passionate about making this and getting there, but it is not going to be easy. He says what is said might be painful to hear but we need to ask ourselves where this person is coming from and why they would say this? We need to keep our minds open and listen with our hearts.

Maria Salsman asked for clarification on what her committee was being asked to do. It was suggested they analyze the data they collected and see what the kids asked for and come up with a list of the top five.

Ted Hoffman wondered if it would be helpful to look at the budgets of the non-profits in the area. Jaclyn Smith-Esters said non-profits rely on grants and donations and most people who donate want the money to programs, not paying utility bills. Non-profits might like the opportunity to lease space rather than own it because of the maintenance costs.

Public Comment

Deanna Trout from the Community Hygiene Pantry said she appreciated the core amenities group asked the questions about showers and laundry. She said you would be surprised how many people live without running water. In her work with the patrons of the Community Hygiene Pantry she understands the struggle people can have and sometimes they do bad things because that is the only way they can get their needs met.

Carolyn Grinder said it is great you are asking the teens and the seniors, but 65% of the area population falls in the 18-65 year old group. She says we need to survey them too. She also asked if the agenda for task force meeting could be posted online. *(It was answered that it is on-line)*

Bonnie Harris asked when our next meeting would be. *(It was answered the next meeting was Sept. 26)* if we had a timeline to complete a community center. *(It was answered that we would have to present a report to City Council on December 4.)* She encouraged us to visit other Community Centers and ask their directors questions. She said money should not be an issue because there are funds available in the community.

Melissa Woldridge asked how the survey was accessed. She reported her son did not receive the survey. *(It was answered that was available through Skyward, but if he did not receive it he should go to the office and ask to get a copy.)*

Tracy Robertson asked when we are going to break ground on a community center. She wanted to know if there is a timeline.

Chair Franklin reminded everyone that public comment was not meant to be dialogue, but a time for the public to speak.

Sam Cohen said he echoed the task force member that suggested we poll the people in Knox County Housing. That it seemed to him like the small sampling of people have been polled.

Tracy Robertson added that single parents need to be asked. They who will be most likely to use a community center as they are people who do not have a support system in place. (in comparison to people who are members of the Y and the Oaks who already have a support system to rely on.)

Linda Medley asked if there would be transportation to and from a community center.

Tracy Robertson said the old community center was for older people and not kids. The Carver Center served kids. If you only want to spend 2.5 million, then think about breaking it apart and doing something for the elderly and something for the youth and maybe they could have programs that intertwine. We need to do something for the youth. They don't have enough to do. They do have roller rink, but no bowling and many do not have the money to attend the Y. If we don't do something for the youth we are only going to have more vandalism and problems.

Michael Spinks spoke about his business the Youth Sports Academy. He runs Skate Palace and just opened up a mini-golf course. He said kids are coming, not just to skate. He is trying to develop an afterschool/mentorship program. He always has adults on hand. He mentioned when he was younger he went to the Carver Center and sometimes that was where he got his last meal for the day. He buys pizza for the kids at Skate Palace and sometimes they pay, and sometimes they can't, but they still get fed. He would like to be included in the conversation about youth programming and serving the youth.

Melissa Bryant says she works at the Y and wants people to understand that the Y offers scholarships and discounted family memberships. She doesn't want people to think they can't afford the Y because they can. Someone says that many don't have transportation to the Y. Melissa says she can't do anything about transportation, but that the Y can give sponsorships to make it affordable.

Melissa Woldridge asked if any of the non-profits were willing to work together with the Community Center. She mentioned her son has been banned from the Y, so she wonders if the Community Center brings kids to the Y, but with supervision would he be allowed back in the Y.

The library announced they were closing and we would need to close our meeting.

Jaclyn Smith-Esters motioned we adjourn and Tony Franklin seconded. The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted by Darla Krejci

The next meeting of the Community Center Task Force will be Tuesday, September 26 at 6:00 p.m. in the City Council Chambers.

(NOTE: The September 26th meeting will be at Carl Sandburg College at the Christ Center.)

