



Vision 2030

Montgomery County Parks and Recreation Vision 2030 and Strategic Plan

DRAFT

Ice Skating Facilities Focus Group Notes

May 25, 2010, 7-8:30 pm

The participants were provided an overview of the Vision 2030 project and asked a series of questions. Following are the notes from the focus group discussion attended by seven ice facility stakeholders. Two M-NCPPC staff persons also attended the meeting and shared information on ice operations, when applicable, to help inform the discussion. (Note: tennis facility stakeholders were invited to this focus group but no participants attended; therefore tennis facilities were not discussed.)

*Indicates written notes submitted after the meeting from a Cabin John ice skating coach participant who joined the focus group at the end of the meeting.

Ice Skating Facilities

- 1) What are the **strengths** of the current ice rinks and programs managed by the M-NCPPC Department of Parks in Montgomery County?
 - Outstanding staff
 - Cleanliness of facilities
 - Cabin John is a great facility with a great location
 - Good ice availability – seems like greater access than at Rockville facility
 - Quality of ice is good
 - *Variety of programming (e.g. recreational, hockey, figure skating classes and sessions; public sessions; special events such as exhibitions and games)
 - *Ample ice time for figure skating
 - *Good Skating Directors (Cabin John and Wheaton facilities) who listen to the coaches and patrons

- 2) What are the **key issues** related to ice rinks in Montgomery County (e.g. availability, locations, additional facility needs, hockey, fees, services, pro shop, snack bar, variety of program offerings)?
 - Accessibility and scheduling – option of online reservation system; scheduling – visibility and availability; hard to lock into a 6 + month commitment to reserve ice
 - How feasible is the ice rink business for the Commission? What's the benefit of having ice rink run by the Commission/government versus privately?
 - Background from staff – Cabin John covers operating costs, not debt service
 - Having better communication – need to understand the needs of different stakeholders and scheduling issues; freestyle session times are not grouped, need back to back sessions – not effective time for the freestyle teacher; 10 years ago had a scheduling group of user groups – help put ice scheduling policy together – could revive this
 - NHL sheet looked a little worn (right after winter) – this was due to a temporary issue that was resolved

- For in-line skating cost differential is a concern – \$125 at Wheaton versus \$10/hr at Kensington; cost is too high; (Wheaton outdoor rink is now shut down)
- Need to review ice rink rate system – currently there are not different prime time and off peak rates; there is a volume amount for figure skaters , but not for hockey; need to look into volume discounts
- Adults can't skate until 9 pm
- Associated business-lost opportunities – food service (don't know when the snack shop will be open); pro shop – high level skaters don't use; drive to Ashburn to get skates sharpened
- Need to be entrepreneurial to make business work
- May need an extra rink; don't think it should be subsidized; potential future rink site is Ridge Road (Clarksburg/Damascus area)
- Hockey is growing (success of the Capitals); ice skating also growing; demand is growing; 1,600 a week at Cabin John
- Increase marketing and communication and continue to cross promote – provide more forums for feedback; currently staff compare fees with other providers; do a lot of marketing
- Need to look at trends – Down County will need more capacity; now Up County (Ridge Road) wants a facility
- Survey current users – people will travel depending on the coaches; need to research where are people coming from
- Other providers – Rockville (used to be public, now private – services the hockey clubs) – when built this rink affected Wheaton attendance; other private facilities are located in Frederick, Laurel, and Asheville
- Have a Mighty Might program for beginner hockey (300-500 participants); others are providing youth travelling programs, so there is not a need for them to provide this service
- NYHA – what percentage of ice is used? Perception is that they control a lot of ice
- Policy – May need to revisit the 30/30/30 split policy of dividing time between figure skating, hockey and public skate from Sept. 1 – March 31, Mon.-Fri, 3-8pm
- Revisit how scheduling lottery works – considering staggering when it is held
- *Ice Availability – figure skaters practice all year; and advanced skaters need 2-3 hours of ice at a time to practice. During peak season, we usually have to go to other rinks to get enough ice time after school. High schools start early in the morning now, so these skaters don't have the option of skating before school.
- *Coordination between rinks – it would help to have better coordination of scheduling for lessons and figure skating sessions between Cabin John and Wheaton rinks, such as during peak season offer hockey at Cabin John on Mondays and figure skating at Wheaton on Monday; this would help multiple user groups.
- *Pro Shop – figure skate fitting and sharpening requires a great deal of knowledge and experience. Skates that are too big can cause injury. One bad sharpening can ruin an expensive (\$200-\$500) blade. Most advanced skaters go elsewhere for boot and blade service because they have learned that they must go elsewhere to preserve the quality of their skates and get the expertise they need.
- *Fees – some sort of frequent freestyle program would be very helpful for our skaters who attend many sessions per week. Currently, a skater who goes to Stick-and-Puck sessions gets 1.5-2 hours of ice for \$12. A figure skater gets 45-60 min of ice for \$12. A one hour stick-and-puck session is just \$6.25! Given that figure skaters skate many more sessions than Stick-and-Puck skaters, this seems very out of balance. Loyal, repeat customers should be given some sort

of price equivalence, if not a price break. Ice dancers pay \$12 for 1.5-2 hours also. So different user groups get different rates - this should be addressed.

3) What suggestions do you have for improvement of ice facilities and programs in the County?

- Balance the load between the rinks – try to prop-up Wheaton with high demand from Cabin John (if the price is right)
- Understand future needs and demands for another ice facility – appropriate location
- Review the expansion/growth potential at Cabin John
- *Communication and Planning – more long-term schedule planning that includes coaches so that we can determine when we may a) need to rent ice, b) need to go to another rink, and c) have to make alternate plans because of ice maintenance that is needed.
- *Flexibility – at this time, there is no way to teach 3 skaters - we can teach a private (1 skater); semi private (2 skaters); or group (4 or more skaters). Programming for small groups (3-6 skaters) is very useful for advanced classes (e.g. spinning, jumping).
- *Use of whole facility – to train, figure skaters need off-ice services, including an off-ice harness, dance classes, and fitness sessions. We have some of these things available at the rink but we are very limited in how we can use the facility for off-ice training. This is a problem.
- *More local managerial control – Allow the local managers, who know their facilities and programs better than anyone outside of the building, to make decisions (and be held accountable for them).

4) What are potential partnerships to expand or improve the ice skating facilities Montgomery County?

- Opportunity with high school hockey teams – Thurs., Fri. night prime time games- Partner with the figure skating club (over 900 members) – same idea with a performance; bring in revenue and expand marketing
- Consider charging admission fees for spectators – now don't charge anything – particularly for hockey games and figure skating performances
- Pro shop – possible private vendor or a private contractor; has opportunity to make more money; (Note: they cannot bring in franchise for the food service)
- *Local clubs and schools – for example, the Washington Figure Skating Club (<http://wfsc.net/>) is very active in our area and rents a large amount of ice (whole days of ice) for test sessions and competitions. Partnering with organizations such as WFSC can help tailor programming for the patrons and also benefit from the knowledgeable all volunteer organization that is dedicated to serving our figure skaters.
- *National organizations – U.S. Figure Skating is the national governing body of sport for figure skating in the U.S. and may be a good resource for information or promotional events. (<http://usfsa.org/>)
- *Professional Skaters Association is our national coaching association. PSA events bring coaches and skaters to the rink and provide opportunities for education of coaches - again, opportunities to increase visibility and promote the rink. (<http://www.skatepsa.com/>)

5) Is there anything else we should keep in mind as we move forward with this planning process?

- Wheaton – speed skating is huge, especially among the Asian community; a lot of languages; a lot of diversity; in communications not reaching all the groups; communications issue is broad
- *Are the planners stopping by the rinks during all seasons of the year to observe how the facility is actually used? Are they looking at successful programs around the USA to see what works and why? What doesn't work and why? Are the planners thinking big enough, meaning, are they looking for ways to ADD VALUE and INCREASE REVENUE, not just cut costs? Are the planners aware that many skaters (all user groups) skate for a lifetime - and many members of the same family skate for years, e.g. patronize the facility on a regular basis for years. What can we do to cultivate those customer relationships and improve them in ways that will help the bottom line of the rink and serve the community?