

Shenango Valley
Intergovernmental Study Committee

RECREATION AND LIBRARIES SUBCOMMITTEE

FINAL REPORT

April 29, 2003

BACKGROUND

Subcommittee Members and Role

The Shenango Valley Intergovernmental Study Committee Recreation and Libraries Subcommittee consists of the following active members, assisted by the following resource people:

Subcommittee Members

Pat White, Chairperson
Carl Eirich
Rochelle James
Henrietta King

Resource People

Ed Chess, Hermitage Recreation Director
Melissa Koch, MCRCOG Regional Parks and Recreation Specialist
Margaret Orchard, Stey-Nevant Librarian
Karen Spak, Shenango Valley Community Library Director

The role of the subcommittee was to project a vision of an efficient and cost-effective parks and recreation program (including libraries) being provided and financed under a single, municipal government for the Shenango Valley, ensuring that the current level of service in each municipality would be maintained or improved for all.

SERVICE DESCRIPTION – RECREATION

General Description

Parks and recreation programs throughout the Shenango Valley are widely varied in nature. The City of Hermitage provides the most comprehensive recreation program, offering year-round classes for individuals ranging in age from toddler to adult. Hermitage offers sports-related programs (basketball, baseball, football, skiing and track, etc.); reading programs (book of the month program); opportunities to learn foreign languages; swing dance classes, arts and crafts programs; and computer classes, to name a few. The summer program offered in the City of Hermitage is provided in conjunction with the Hermitage School District through the Recreation Commission.

The City of Farrell and Borough of Wheatland provide a summer recreation program in conjunction with the Farrell Area School District through the Farrell Recreation Commission.

The City of Farrell offers a six-week summer playground program with breakfast and lunch provided to all participants. In the Borough of Wheatland, this program is provided at the Beechwood Avenue playground.

The City of Sharon's parks and recreation program consists of a summer playground program offered to the children of Sharon.

The Borough of Sharpsville currently offers no recreational programming for residents, except for a light-up night at Christmastime. There are parks and playgrounds located in and maintained by the Borough, however the Borough does not staff these facilities during the summer months.

Currently there are only two full-time employees related to parks and recreation programs in the Shenango Valley. These include the director of the City of Hermitage's Parks and Recreation Department, and the Mercer County Regional Council of Government's regional parks and recreation specialist. The remaining personnel are seasonal employees, hired by the municipalities, school districts, and/or recreation boards and commissions. Additional recreational service providers throughout the Shenango Valley include various private providers and the Mercer County Housing Authority.

In terms of equipment, the municipalities really do not own any capital equipment (excluding playground equipment) over \$2,000 directly dedicated to parks and recreation services.

City of Farrell and Borough of Wheatland

The City of Farrell and Borough of Wheatland provide a summer recreation program in conjunction with the Farrell Area School District through the Farrell Recreation Commission. Parks and playgrounds located within the City of Farrell include: (1) Emerson Avenue Playground, owned by the City; (2) Veterans Square, owned by the City; (3) South West Gardens Park, owned by the City; (4) School Park, a playground located at one of the Farrell Area schools; (5) Steel City Terrace, owned by the Mercer County Housing Authority; and (6) Kedron Park, owned by the Mercer County Housing Authority. Parks and playgrounds located in the Borough of Wheatland include: (1) Beechwood Playground, owned by the Borough; (2) a gazebo and small park beside the Borough building also owned by the Borough; and (3) a privately owned little league field.

City of Farrell Public Works department employees maintain the City-owned parks. Borough of Wheatland Street Department employees maintain Borough-owned parks.

With respect to the aforementioned facilities, currently there are a number of issues related to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility and the ability of these facilities to meet current safety standards under Pennsylvania law. The following facilities are not ADA accessible, and their equipment is outdated and will not meet current safety standards: (1) South West Gardens; (2) Emerson Avenue Playground; (3) Steel City Terrace; (4) Kedron Park; and (5) Beechwood Playground. It is important to note, however, that the Mercer County Regional

Council of Governments recently submitted a grant application to the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources for playground revitalization in the City of Farrell, and should the grant be approved, the playgrounds of South West Gardens and Emerson Avenue will be revitalized.

School Park is ADA accessible and has newer equipment that should meet safety standards, however it does not have a “safety surface.” The little league field in Wheatland has no playground equipment and is well maintained, however it is not ADA accessible and does contain some structures that need general maintenance.

City of Hermitage

A full-time Recreation Director heads the City of Hermitage Parks and Recreation Department. The department oversees the scheduling, operation and maintenance of all City recreation facilities, and provides year-round educational, athletic, and arts enrichment activities and programs for individuals of all ages. The Department’s largest program is the summer recreation program, a cooperative program with the Hermitage School District through the Recreation Commission, which offers activities for all Hermitage students.

The department hires instructors and program directors for each program, and uses City and School District facilities whenever possible. Minimal fees are charged for some programs to offset the costs of the instructors, supplies and equipment, and many programs are nearly self-supportive through the use of these fees. The Director works closely in providing programs and sharing facilities with other recreation providers in the area, including the Hermitage School District, F.H. Buhl Club, YMCA, Little League and other youth sports organizations, and the Mercer County Regional COG. The Director’s salary is split between the City and Hermitage School District.

There are two playgrounds owned and operated by the City of Hermitage. These include: (1) Baker Avenue Playground; and (2) Rodney White Olympic Park. Both of these facilities are ADA accessible and meet current safety standards under Pennsylvania law.

City of Sharon

The City of Sharon provides a summer recreation program in conjunction with the Sharon City School District through the Sharon Recreation Board.

City-owned parks and playgrounds located in the municipality include: (1) Jefferson Avenue Playground; (2) Bicentennial Park; (3) North Sharon Playground; (4) “B” Street Playground; (5) Riverview Park; and (6) Memorial Field, an open grassy area used for midget football and cheerleading practice, etc. Facilities owned by the Sharon School District include: (1) Wengler Playground & Ball Field; (2) Musser Playground; (3) West Hill Playground; and (4) Case Avenue Playground. Additional parks and playgrounds in the City include: (1) Mesabi Street Playground, owned by Mercer County Housing Authority.

The following observations and recommendations regarding City-owned playgrounds throughout the City of Sharon are summarized from a recent playground safety audit completed by Pashek Associates:

Jefferson Avenue Playground:

It was recommended that the city should remove Whirl #2 and #3, the Tandem Rockers, Spring Rockers, and Sand Box. The only play equipment that is recommended to remain and be replaced are Swings #1 and #2, the Slide, Whirl #1, and the Play Structure. All in all, this is the playground that was recommended to be serviced first due to the fact that it is in need of the most attention.

Bicentennial Park:

The recommendations of the study suggest removing the following items: Slide/Climber, Climber #1, and Climber #2. The remaining equipment is to be replaced: Swing, Whirl, and Balance Beam.

North Sharon Playground:

This playground has only a Swing and a Slide. Both are recommended to remain and be renovated.

“B” Street Playground:

It is suggested to remove the Play Structure and the Swing. The Whirl can remain and be renovated.

All playgrounds were found to have the following safety hazards:

- ✓ No protective safety surfacing under the equipment
- ✓ Entrapments
- ✓ Inadequate use zones
- ✓ Broken/structurally unsafe equipment
- ✓ Exposed footings and debris
- ✓ Protrusions
- ✓ Lack of sidewalk access
- ✓ Lack of perimeter fencing
- ✓ Lack of signage on bordering roads

Borough of Sharpsville

The Borough of Sharpsville through its Public Works Department maintains parks and playgrounds throughout the Borough, including: (1) Erie Canal/Recreational Area, owned and maintained by the Borough; (2) 13th Street Playground, owned by the school district and maintained by the Borough; and (3) Veterans Park, owned and maintained by the Borough.

Mercer County Regional COG Recreational Programs

There are a number of programs currently provided by the Mercer County Regional Council of Governments (MCRCOG) that include participation from some or all of the five Shenango Valley Municipalities. These include: (1) Chestnut Run Public Swim Beach Facility that has participation from all five of the SVISC municipalities; (2) Shenango Valley Softball Recreational Complex, which has participation from Farrell, Hermitage, Sharon and Wheatland; and (3) the hiring of a shared "Regional Parks and Recreation Specialist" that has participation from all five SVISC municipalities.

In addition to these programs and numerous others, the MCRCOG is currently developing the following recreational facilities and programs: (1) Soccer field at the Shenango Valley Softball Recreational Complex; (2) walking trails, and (3) an ice rink.

Private Providers

There are also a number of private recreational facilities located throughout the Shenango Valley, including the F.H. Buhl Club, Buhl Farm, YMCA, Little League programs, and others.

FINANCES

Completion of this section is largely dependent on the analysis underway by the SVISC Finance Subcommittee. The Recreation Subcommittee believes that the level of funding should be similar to current levels going into the new government, allowing for increases where necessary to gradually bring levels of service provision in the Valley up to acceptable year-round programmatic standards. The new government should strive to achieve the "York Model" into the future once the new government is up and running. (See appendix information.)

It is important to reiterate that currently there are two full-time employees dedicated to parks and recreation services in the Shenango Valley. The remaining personnel are seasonal employees hired by the municipalities, school districts, and/or recreation boards and commissions. Additional recreational service providers throughout the Shenango Valley include various private providers and the Mercer County Housing Authority.

RECREATION RECOMMENDATIONS

- A comprehensive recreation, park and open space plan should be undertaken that will include (1) an inventory and analysis of what currently exists regarding parks and recreation administration, financing and programming, (2) the cost to bring recreation areas up to specifications and the cost of additional equipment (if necessary), and (3) a vision, goals and implementation strategies, including potential sources of funding (grants, programs, etc.). This study is estimated to cost between \$40,000 and \$50,000, and should be undertaken as soon as possible following creation of the new government.

- Municipalities currently in the process of rehabilitating their playgrounds should follow through with those efforts; additional improvements needed at the parks and recreation facilities should be made following the comprehensive recreation study.
- The new government should seek to maintain current levels of service in the areas of the municipality initially, and immediately begin to move toward bringing all areas of the municipality up to acceptable year-round programmatic standards. This implies the addition of new programs in areas that currently do not have them, or the ability for all residents to partake of programs currently offered in one or more of the municipalities. This will most likely require changes in staffing levels, and will require coordination with the school districts, private providers and others within the various communities. In the near term, the staffing levels should include at a minimum, one director and two assistants (one for programming and one for facility operations.) All of these issues could, and should be addressed through the recommended comprehensive recreation, park and open space plan.
- The new municipality should seek to implement additional programs as it becomes feasible including additional programs for senior citizens, rollerblading areas, skate park(s), a bike path, and development of a multi-purpose sports complex. In adding these programs and facilities, attempts should be made to equalize them throughout the current five geographic areas. The goal, into the future, would be for the new municipality to implement a comprehensive parks and recreation program similar in scope to that currently offered by the City of York (see attached write-up and appendix information.)
- The new municipality should explore ways increase interaction among existing service providers including municipalities, school districts, private providers, etc. and programs in order to enhance services where possible.

SERVICE DESCRIPTION - LIBRARIES

City of Farrell and Borough of Wheatland

The City of Farrell owns and operates Stey-Nevant Library, which provides free public library services to City of Farrell residents. A full-time librarian, three part-time clerks and several volunteers staff the library. Two part-time maintenance employees take care of the facility. A volunteer Library Board comprised of City of Farrell residents advises the library.

Residents in the Borough of Wheatland may also utilize Stey-Nevant Library, however the Borough makes no financial contribution to the library, and therefore Wheatland residents must purchase library cards in order to use the library.

City funding of the library is supplemented by grants, private contributions and state aid.

City of Hermitage, City of Sharon and Borough of Sharpsville

The Shenango Valley Community Library provides free library service to residents of the City of Hermitage and the City of Sharon. One full-time director, one full-time reference librarian, one full-time children's librarian, four full-time clerks, one part-time reference person, one part-time clerk, two part-time housekeeping personnel, three part-time pages, and numerous volunteers staff this library. The library is governed by the volunteer Shenango Valley Library Board, which contains representation from both Hermitage and Sharon. This is different from the Stey-Nevant library board, which is purely advisory.

Funding for the libraries is provided by the Cities of Sharon and Hermitage, and is supplemented by grants, private contributions and state aid.

Residents of the Borough of Sharpsville may also use the Shenango Valley Community Library, however, the Borough does not make a financial contribution to the library and therefore residents must purchase library cards to use the library. The Borough reimburses its residents for one-half the cost of their library cards. Because it makes no direct financial contribution to the library, the Borough has no representation on the library board.

Both the Stey-Nevant Library and the Shenango Valley Community Library are full service libraries.

FINANCES

This section is largely dependent on completion of the SVISC Finance Subcommittee's analysis. Information from the libraries' budgets is also included in the Appendix.

Pennsylvania's standards to receive State Aid require at least maintenance of local government support from the previous year. An absolute minimum of \$8.56 per capita or \$375,000 (in 2001 dollars) will be required in Local Government Income to maintain current service levels and meet State standards. Any reduction would result in service cuts and a loss of State Aid. An increase in the population served would result in an increase in State Aid, but only as long as the per capita Local Government Income is maintained.

A local government contribution of \$375,000 would maintain the status quo. However, planners must consider that an administrative merger of the two libraries, plus the addition of more than 5,000 residents to the libraries' combined service area would require significant changes in service:

- Purchase of books and other library materials to meet increased need;
- Centralized acquisitions (ordering, cataloging, processing) requiring additional technical services staff;
- Shared catalog and library management software (expensive technology upgrades to allow off-site access);
- Interlibrary delivery service;

- Technology - more computers, greater need for a technology coordinator;
- Coordination of children's services between locations. Increased number of story times and other children's programs, both in the library and outside;
- Increased reference staff hours;
- More outreach programs; and,
- Public relations to reach new constituency.

One very important note with respect to the libraries and current capital needs is that the parking garage associated with the Shenango Valley Community Library is reportedly in dire need of repair. Costs of necessary repairs have been estimated at \$660,000.

LIBRARY RECOMMENDATIONS (pending review of financial implications)

- The current two autonomous libraries should be merged into one main library and one (or more) branches. The libraries will follow uniform policies and procedures and will implement uniform position titles, job descriptions, salary ranges and union status.
- The new library should be a department of the new municipality, and will have a resolution designating it to be the agent for providing library service for the municipality.
- Ownership of the library buildings should be transferred to the new municipality, which will be responsible for their upkeep and maintenance.
- A new seven-member library advisory board should be formed to represent the new community.

APPENDIX