

Article published Feb 13, 2007

OUR OPINION

Looking ahead to stay ahead

Sometimes government actually does fulfill the wishes of the citizenry. Sometimes, it even exceeds them.

Marion County's park system is a refreshing example of just that. When voters approved the \$20 million Pennies for Parks bond issue back in 1988, the message was clear that the people wanted some of our picturesque county set aside for conservation and recreation. Today, that \$20 million is almost exhausted, but what Marion Countians have to show for it is a nationally recognized system of parks of all sizes and functions, from neighborhood playgrounds and community ballfields to regional parks and expansive sportsplexes.

The voters in '88 were unknowing visionaries, for sure. They thankfully recognized that if Marion County was to preserve some of its most environmentally significant lands and provide ample future recreation areas, it would require public investment. But with the money to build new parks about gone, down to a few hundred thousand dollars, and growth to surely require more funding for both park development and operation, it is time to think about the future.

Members of the Marion County Parks and Recreation Department and its five-member Parks and Recreation Advisory Council will meet this morning to begin mapping out that future. What a welcome change for the county, long castigated in this column and elsewhere in the community for being lethargic, shortsighted and, at times, downright inept at planning for roads, utilities and solid waste.

The parks staff and its advisers will discuss updating its five- and 10-year master plans. As part of that, they will consider options for additional operating funds that undoubtedly will be needed as the county and its park system grows. What they say should be viewed as credible, considering the parks operating budget has only grown from \$2.3 million in

2000-01 to \$2.5 million this year. Among the sources for future operating money up for discussion is a possible dedicated millage on property tax bills, a countywide Municipal Services Taxing Unit and expanded resident and non-resident user fees.

How to build more parks in the future is also on the agenda. Again, how to pay for them is the immediate question. And again, the parks staff and PRAC will look at multiple options, including an impact fee on new construction, setting aside a portion of any funds generated by Transfers of Development Rights, the establishment of a "parks fund" from user fees, another Pennies for Parks-type bond referendum, more developer "parkland contributions" and, possibly at some point, a voter referendum for a half-cent sales tax.

Fees and taxes aren't the only means of expanding the park system the group will consider, either. They also will talk about how to enhance an already impressive record of partnerships - with private landholders, Marion County's municipalities and the school system - as well as being more aggressive in seeking state and federal grants.

What's so appealing and, frankly, sensible about the tenor of today's meeting is parks director Lee Niblock, his staff and PRAC are being proactive and doing so as a team. They are not waiting until the county is faced with a parks funding crisis, like our roads or utilities dilemmas, to begin taking action. Plus, they are examining a broad variety of potential funding sources and cooperative arrangements that will minimize the impact on any one group, indeed on all taxpayers.

"We are trying to play a little catch-up and a lot of keep-up," Niblock told us.

We like the sound of that. For too long population growth has consistently outpaced the county's ability to provide adequate services, resulting in an unending and unfulfilling game of catch-up in virtually every area of public services.

We applaud Niblock, his team and especially the members of PRAC - chairman Stan Hanson, Shirley Little, Tracy Raines, Pat Gabriel and Billy Ward, who have given sound advice to the parks staff while allowing them to carry out their important mission for the community - for having the foresight to ensure the county can keep up its jewel of a park system, and not let us get into a position of again having to play catch-up.
