Paying for field use

BY **BOYD "ROB" MONTGOMERY, CSFM**

Many communities struggle with the idea of charging a user fee for field rental cost. Why is this concept a struggle?

The first argument that many community leaders face when tackling this issue is that the taxpayers have built the fields and should not have to pay for use. Of course, you can buy into the notion that your small percentage of tax dollars allows you to use the fields, can't you? Well, not really! If you look at the overall statement and impact of the funds generated based on the community numbers, realistically the average taxpayer might support the facility with a very small amount in relation to the overall operation and capital budgets. Yet, the argument is that they still support the facility, right? Understanding the definition of "support" is critical. While many of the new multi-purpose recreational facilities could be built without this "support," many taxpayers don't understand that the on-going success of a facility is directly relative to the cost structure of maintaining that facility.

Let's look at it this way. If your community builds a recreation center or ice arena the majority of reasonable people will understand that there are costs associated with the operation of the building. It is one of those beliefs that if they see walls, HVAC, lights, and a roof, those costs are associated with the operation of the building. Why are outdoor athletic fields any different? Just like buildings, there are significant capital costs and on-going maintenance costs associated with athletic fields.

So why is there a struggle? Ice vs. grass, cement walls vs. spectator stands, HVAC vs. irrigation, etc. How do you get people to understand the costs associated with expectation? COMMUNICATION!

Is there a potential dilemma? Yes, like any cookie jar, there are only so many cookies to go around before you run out. If communities continue to support education, safety support systems, other tax referendums, and recreation, sooner or later the community will be so taxed out that they will have to start picking and choosing. We all know who comes out on the losing end of that battle—recreation. So we are back in that evolutionary cycle of success and support for many years then comes cut backs and decline. The costs associated with these facilities never go down. Not only do communities risk decline in the overall success of their facilities, but also the talented people that develop programs and run them.

What to do

What can we do? While there is still much contention in charging user fees or facility rental costs, it really is a compliment to a successful operation. Why tax the whole community all the time, when you should have the ones who use the facilities more often contribute more frequently? Is that the answer?

NO. While many hang their hat on this being the only solution to "right the sinking ship," it should be viewed as a complement to a much bigger picture. Developing a master finance plan that stretches across a number of different mediums should be the goal. Ideally, tax dollars should be a small percentage of the financing/support. Also, consider that these potential sources of revenue (user fees, facilities rentals, partnership opportunities with the community or nationally, fund-raising events, and sponsorship opportunities) are just a few of the ways to generate revenue. I am sure that many of you are thinking, "In this economy, sponsorships and support is shrinking." While this may be the case on the surface, if you look at what you have to offer and develop partnerships/sponsorships that offer exposure and "dollar for dollar returns," then you should be able to locate the funding. There are many innovative ideas in funding; you just need to engage the people around you for the sparks that light the fire.

Let's pose this question now that many communities around the U.S. have built and/or partially funded some sort of stadium or arena. Do you as a taxpayer have the right to walk onto those fields and demand use since your tax dollars supported those projects? Most likely not and it might equal a night's stay in jail if you are caught. Tax dollars in communities are used for many things, but that doesn't give us the right to demand free use. ST

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