Mastering your Master Plan

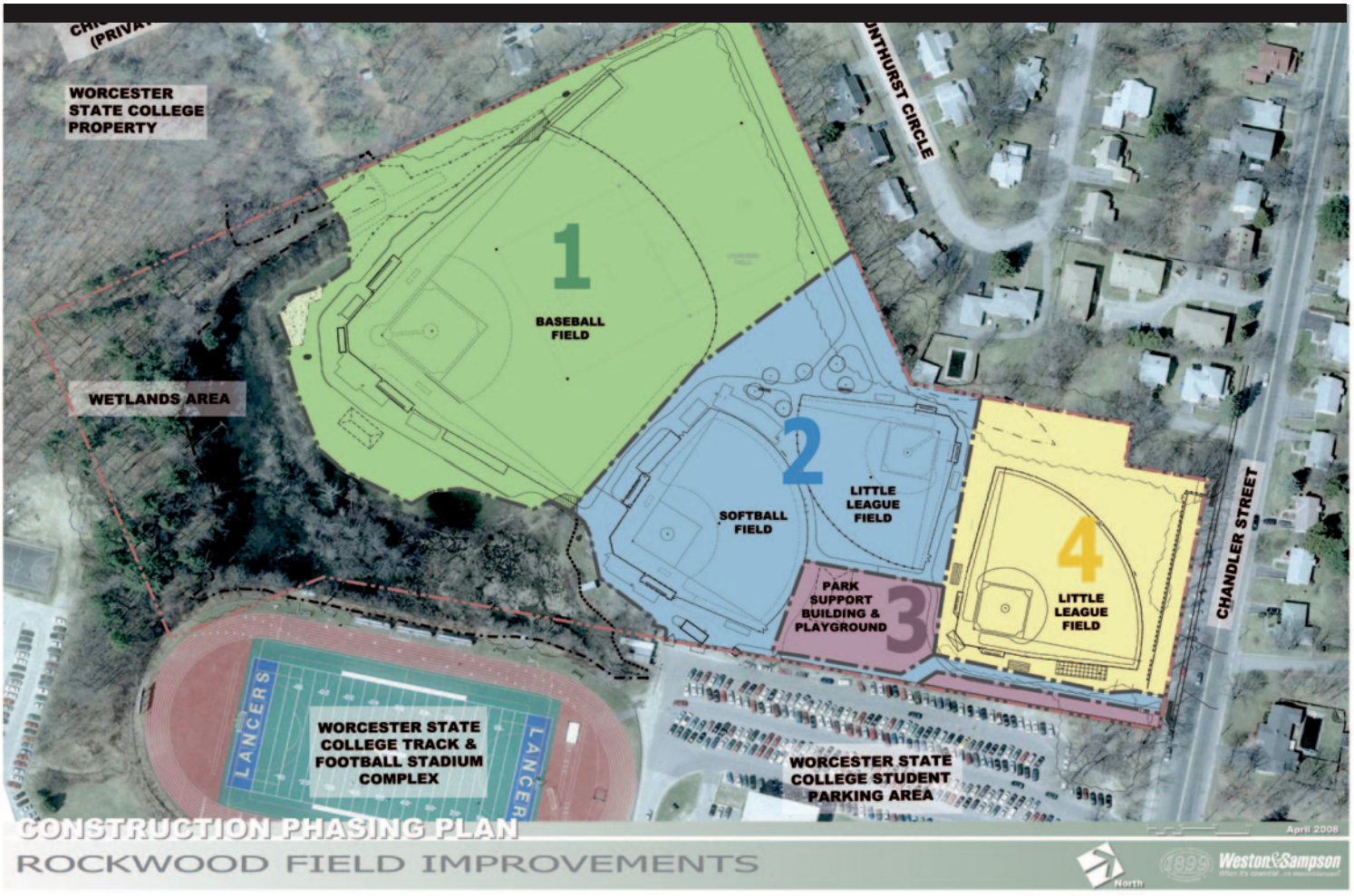
THE MASTER PLANNING PROCESS is an important component of how the City of Worcester, MA, population of more than 175,000, plans and implements capital improvement programs throughout its 1,300+ acres with 60 parks and athletic facilities. It allows the City to identify and prioritize needs, wants and desires of the neighbors, organizations and users at each Park.

This town hall atmosphere embraces the public participation process and has been very successful for the City. It has lead to less criticism, better tailoring of the improvement program and more dedication by the participants of the process. Our method has not come easy and at one time there were different processes based on what Consultant or facility was being planned.

In an attempt to streamline the multitude of approaches, the best functions of the previous plans were combined with new ideas and developed into our current Master Planning process. Once complete, each plan becomes a guidebook for improvements that assists the City in allocating and scheduling capital funds, as well as assisting in the acquisition of other funding sources.

The master planning process can be initiated in one of three ways: implementation by the City Administration, a request by the public, or a request by an elected official. Each process is reviewed by the Department of Public Works and Parks, Parks Recreation & Cemetery Division (DPW & Parks) to clarify the basic needs of the facility and how the improvements rate with other park needs throughout the system.

Once the need for improvements of the park has been confirmed, the City begins the planning process by scheduling the authorization of capital improvement funding, which can come from a number of sources, including: City tax levy authorization, Community Development



Block Grant (CDBG), federal authorization, state authorization, grants, or donations. This initial funding will be used to fund the procurement of a design/ engineering consultant to assist in the development of the Master Plan.

SCOPE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Once this funding has been secured, the City begins the process of defining the project scope, consultant responsibilities and the procurement of services. The project scope and responsibilities are crucial to achieving the final results of the Master Plan. As a minimum standard the City requires six public hearings, five consultant/departmental meetings, all colored plans for presentations, expenses (travel, printing, etc), and the final completed document as part as any Master Plan proposal.

Once the scope has been confirmed the method of selection begins in one of four processes; Request for Proposals, Request for Qualifications, prequalification of consultants, or general selection (in some areas it is not required to complete a formal process for the selection of a consultant for horizontal design). Additionally, there may be other processes based on each states regulation, so it is important to make sure you review all options with your municipal attorney or purchasing agent.

If a formal process is used I suggest that the organization perform formal interviews with each consultant. This process allows for a question and answer period and the ability for a municipality to understanding of how they will work with the Consultant. Once a proposal has been accepted it is time to negotiate the fee for the agreed upon scope of services. It is important (if at all possible) to make sure it is a flat fee and includes all costs required to complete the plan.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

Once the consultant has been selected it is time to begin the public participation process by reviewing generally available GIS/ aerial mapping of the facility. GIS/ aerial information may be obtained from a number of sources including local, state or federal agencies, pre-existing maps, plans from previous projects as well as the internet. This mapping allows for a general understanding of the area and should be used in the public participation process as a visual aid in identifying the facility under discussion.

Once the scope has been confirmed the method of selection begins

For this first meeting the City develops a contact list of organizations and facility users, as well as a list of property owners within 1,000 feet of the facility and invites all to be part of the public meeting process. Additionally, the City follows all open meeting law requirements by posting this meeting notice with the City Clerk and on the City website.

There are times when a facility is located in a neighborhood that contains renters, immigrants or others that may not obtain or read a notice. In these cases the City requests assistance from neighborhood organizations, religious groups, community development corporations, and the City Election Commission to help get the word out on the project meetings and assist in translation.

It is important to engage key stakeholders, those that currently use the facility or live near it as they will be the ones who protect, assist in maintaining and use the facility. It is important that these meetings remain focused, have easily understandable color graphics and encourage public participation.

At the first meeting a presentation is made by the City and consultant on the basic process; what the program goals are including the number of meetings, information requested, thoughts on what should be improved, what could happen at the facility, the timeline of the process, and what the anticipated final outcome will be. At this first meeting the only information that is used is an existing conditions (aerial) map that participants can view and understand the current layout of the facility. The purpose of this is to not predispose any possible ideas, stifle conversation, limit possibilities, or make it seem that a plan is already developed. Following this process allows for an open, honest and less formal discussion with all in attendance. At the completion of this meeting all comments are reviewed, possible improvements discussed, and attempts made to implement these items into the plan based on need and priorities of the facility.

A second meeting is then scheduled to review the initial meeting and present two or three possible conceptual designs based on previous input as well as know topography and facility constraints. There are times that possible improvements are not physically possible based on the available real estate of the facility, including not enough room for a particular field size, the inclusion of wetlands on the property, and other restrictions.

At this meeting additional comments are taken on the proposed designs as well as anything that was not discussed at the first meeting. It is important to have the concepts simplified and overlaid on a GIS (aerial) map to allow meeting participants to easily visualize the improvements. This allows for a better understanding of how the improved facility will operate and what impacts may occur to each individual user, organization or neighbor. The goal of the second meeting is to determine the most favorable concept plan or individual design components for future development and discussion at the third meeting.

A third meeting is then set with the goal of gaining consensus among those in attendance on a plan that can be further developed and completed into a master plan. A single enhanced concept design is presented based on all information gathered to date and all final changes are made to the plan. There may be times when there will be competing views on a plan. It is vital that you continue to allow all comments by those who wish to be heard as long as it is appropriate and not personal. It is important to diffuse and mediate disagreements and ensure all participants are heard. If this is to happen, then a fourth public meeting will need to be scheduled.

Budget Estimates	Cost
Storm Drainage Improvements – Lower Park Tier	$400,000
Farm League Field (175' outfield dimension)	$200,000
Lighted Little League Field (200' outfield dimension) with new orientation	$600,000
Lighted Softball Field	$500,000
Lighted Baseball Field / Multi-purpose Field	$1,100,000
Community Building and Parking Area	$600,000
Other Improvements (Electrical Service Upgrade, Parking Lane at Chandler Street, Trails, Boardwalks, Pathway Systems, Children's Playground Equipment, Site Furnishings and Signage, Tree Planting and Landscaping	$600,000
Budget Total All Improvements	**$4,000,000**

COST ESTIMATES

Once consensus has been reached, it is now time to complete a cost estimate for all work shown on the plan. This estimate must be based (as best as possible) on current costs, including information from recently bid projects, unit prices from current vendors that supply material, as well as a best guess on what may be encountered. Additionally, the City of Worcester stays very conservative in our estimating and we include all probable costs including: construction document development, complete property and topography survey, soil borings or exploratory digging, staff costs for project management, consultant construction administration, contingency, and bidding costs.

It is vital to note in the Master Plan that all costs are in current dollars and fluctuate based on economic conditions. This is something that Worcester previously had not included when we began this process, but has become one of the most important parts of the document. It sets expectations and does not hold the project to a specific cost in the years to come. Figure 1 is an example of the City of Worcester estimate that does not include a note that the estimate is based on current dollars.

Now that the plan has been developed and estimated there are usually more improvements to the facility then funding is available. For this reason a phasing program must be developed based on available funding and scheduling (figure 2). The decisions of what comes first should be based on the building block method in cooperation with what is of the greatest need and what is the most important improvement to the users.

In all applications, using the building block method ensures that each phase is developed by using the previous phase of work as a foundation. The City of Worcester used this method in many projects including the Rockwood Field Renovation Program where we included sport field lighting bases and all conduit when we could not afford the lighting itself, as well the inclusion of irrigation, water and sewer lines through the first phase to support future phases of work.

Additionally, it is important that any work that is completed in an earlier phase should not be renovated again in a future phase. If this happens, the public begins to ask questions on why do the plans call for continually removing previous completed work and may cause additional criticism of the project or the agency in charge of the renovations. As a way to elevate this issue, identify areas that may need to be used more than once during the phasing of the renovations. Use temporary treatments and identify them as being temporary. Worcester has used bit concrete instead of the standard paver system designed for a facility or may use hydro seed as a substitute for sod.

At completion the plan and a draft report is forwarded to the Parks & Recreation Commission for another public hearing. Upon approval by the Commission the report is sent to the City Council through the Executive Office of the City Manager, at which time the plan is usually sent to the City Council Sub Committee on Youth, Parks and Recreation. The Sub Committee holds a final hearing and recommends approval to the full City Council.

Once the City Council approves the Master Plan, the City Administration then begins to review funding options including City tax levy authorization, Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), federal authorization, state authorization, grants, or donations and inclusion into the Capital Improvement Program. The final Master Plan is then completed and placed on the City website for public review and information. (To review our currently posted Master Plans www.worcesterma.gov/dpw/parks-rec.)

Master Planning must be an ever-changing and improving process. The goal is always the same; we want and need public input on our projects. We continue to use new technology to reach and attract this additional input. The Master Plans become the backbone of our improvements and assist when issues arise later on.

As they say, the best defense is a good offense and these plans are just that. So no matter how you do it or what the results are, it just needs to be done. ■

Following this process allows for an open, honest and less formal discussion with all in attendance.

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