

TIMES NEWS

Facilities strained by growth

By **Jenny Overman and Jonathan Allen**
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Editor's note: This is the fourth installment of an occasional series examining the impact of growth on local infrastructure.

The growing population is straining local parks and recreation programs across the township.

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For instance, it has been five years since the Indian Land Recreation Center opened and the facility is already bursting at its seams.

"We knew the growth was coming but we didn't know it would come at this rate," said Frank Overcash, director of Lancaster County Recreation Department. "It's really exploded."

Overcash said he isn't sure exactly how many children and adults the center serves, but it is at least double what the facility served just five years ago. New homes bringing new families to the Panhandle have dramatically increased the number of children participating in recreation leagues and activities. However, no new facilities have been built other than the small rec center.

Programs inside the center have to be balanced between the needs of kids and local senior citizens. With high demand and little room, something has to give. Activities for seniors, sponsored by the Lancaster County Council on Aging, are held each morning at the center. Most mornings, the seniors play bingo and walk around the indoor track. But if they had more space, Overcash said, the group would offer computer training and exercise classes.

The after-school program at the center, as well as summer programs for students, are always at capacity, Overcash said, and in need of more space to expand program opportunities. The program has use of the gym and a conference room, which means students from first to fifth grade are grouped together for most activities. If the program had a larger building, they could divide students by age and offer age-specific programs.

With the help of the private sector, however, a new rec center and community park could be on the way. York Development Group of Charlotte, Coleman Associates, based in Raleigh, N.C., Argus Properties and Inspiration Networks are working together to develop property stretching from the Inspiration Networks campus on Hwy. 521 to the intersection of Collins Road. As part of that "town center" style development, the developers are considering moving the current recreation center, Deputy Roy Hardin Park, and the EMS station to a new location within the town center development, according to Tom Cluderay, a partner with Argus Properties.

Overcash said he has been presented with a plan that includes trading Hardin Park for a new park in another location, but has heard only casual talk about a rec center or moving the EMS station.

"Formally, I haven't had anyone mention that," Overcash said.

Outside the recreation center, youth sports teams are finding it hard to reserve a field for practice. The recreation department recommends that team sports practice three times per week.

That situation will get some relief in October, when 10 new fields will open in a 60-acre county park in Edenmoor, a new community near the intersection of Hwy. 521 and Hwy. 75.

The need for more space is no different in York County, where county officials rely on the cities and towns to provide for all the recreation needs of residents. Each year, York County collects property taxes on residents in the unincorporated areas of the county and divides those funds among York, Clover, Rock Hill and Fort Mill and Tega Cay. In return, residents in the unincorporated areas get to take advantage of recreation programs run by the municipalities without facing any extra

"nonresident" charges.

"One of the hardest things we struggle with is space," Tega Cay Operations Director Charlie Funderburk said. "Everybody always needs more fields."

Luckily, Funderburk said, the city has a good relationship with the Fort Mill School District and is able to use some of the district's fields for its youth sports programs.

"If we didn't, we wouldn't have football, and the soccer program would be handicapped," he said.

Since Funderburk joined the city in 2001 as Parks and Recreation director, the city has added Linnerieux Park Nature Trail and several parks in the LakeShore development, including Lookout Park, which includes a large multipurpose field. However, since Lookout Park runs beneath the Duke Energy power line corridor, the field does not have lights. The city also maintains two baseball diamonds at Runde Field and a baseball diamond and soccer field at Turner Field.

"My first spring, in 2001, we had 250 kids involved in youth sports, Funderburk said. "We have 850 now. We average 20 percent growth a year."

Planning is under way for the 65 to 70-acre Catawba River Park off of New Gray Rock Road. Early proposals call for as many as four baseball/softball diamonds, a gym, up to four lighted multipurpose fields, four tennis courts, a nine-hole disc golf course, walking trails, a canoe/kayak launch and concrete fishing piers near the bottom of the Lake Wylie Dam.

"Catawba Park will be a solution. It won't just be a band-aid," Funderburk said.

In Fort Mill, the town relies heavily on the privately-run, Leroy Springs Recreation Complex for youth sports. Teams play on the fields at the complex as well as the town's baseball fields at Harris Street Park and Doby's Bridge Road Park and on the town's new multipurpose field at Calhoun Street Park, according to Parks and Recreation Director Brown Simpson.

Fort Mill has far fewer parks than Tega Cay - five as opposed to 16 - but the town's Parks and Recreation Department also handles renting town facilities, such as the picnic shelters at the parks, the fields for tournaments and even the town-owned Spratt Building on Main Street. The department is also heavily involved in town-sponsored events such as Springfest and last Saturday's Dylan Mitchell Memorial Criterium, a bike race held downtown.

Between renting park facilities and renting out the Spratt Building, the department brings in roughly \$30,000 a year in revenue for the town. The tournaments that use the Doby's Bridge Field bring visitors who spend money in local businesses, Simpson said.

"We've done a lot," Simpson said. However, "There's still a lot to do."

Fort Mill's original master plan for Doby's Bridge Road Park calls for two more baseball/softball diamonds, a multipurpose field, basketball courts and a central tower/press box for the ball fields.

"There are some other things we can do down the road," Simpson said. "Eventually, we'll probably get into programming."

In recent years, he said, the town has focused on upgrading the facilities at its existing parks. That includes new bathrooms, resurfacing basketball courts and updating shelters.

"We will need more parks as the town limits expand," Simpson said. "We're trying to position ourselves to grow our department and make it stronger. There are a lot of services we can offer, but you have to crawl before you can walk."

One potential avenue for future parks expansion in Fort Mill is to use money from hospitality tax revenues, which can only be spent on tourism related projects. Because the tournaments bring in people from outside the area, there is a good chance expanding Doby's Bridge Road Park would qualify, Simpson said.

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