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Master Planning: How to Manage the Uncertain Future

The term “master planning” invites images of grandiose schemes, big budgets and high risks, but nothing could be further from the truth. If you have ever looked beyond solving an immediate need to consider a need that does not yet exist, you have “master planned.” Billiard players always think ahead to the next shot. Club owners, both big and small, can adopt a similar attitude toward the initial planning and design of their club facilities as well as later renovations, conversions and additions. Despite the uncertainties of fitness trends, demographics, competition, and program growth, it is possible to make intelligent decisions about how, what and where facility changes can be made.

Anytime you make changes to an existing building, the costs can add up quickly – with design fees, surveys, permits, financing, temporary facilities, etc. The time to master plan is before these cost meters start running. The documents related to master planning are simple. The result of the process should be 95% thinking and 5% drawing, and therefore, inexpensive in terms of professional documentation fees. A well-conceived master plan delivers value by ensuring that the expensive work of implementing a facility improvement (design, bidding, and construction) will not have to be “undone” two or three years down the road to satisfy the next set of unforeseen needs. Many clubs spend thousands of dollars renovating their entry lobbies, only to conclude a few years later that the club entry must be completely relocated to accommodate a major expansion or conversion.

A master plan looks at the long-term big picture and provides a rational basis for sequencing future improvements. A good master plan conserves resources, minimizes risk and maintains flexibility.

The following is a simple list of master planning principles which can help any club owners or operators create a “Do-It-Yourself” master plan or enable them to direct their planning professionals toward an effective, well-suited outcome.

1. Existing Conditions: Any master planning effort must be completely informed of existing conditions. The best format for portraying this information is a background composite building and site plan that is small enough in scale to provide a complete overview of the entire club property, and yet large enough in scale to show each and every room in every building. It is vital to show: property lines, setbacks, topography, utilities, parking, amenities, neighboring uses and other significant features such as trees, views, wetlands, easements, and access drives. This plan will become the background reference plan on which all proposed improvements are illustrated. No intelligent planning effort can be conducted without this overview. It is your starting point. Do not proceed without it!

2. Perfection - Not Needed: A master plan need not be perfect in order to have value. Its mere existence can help develop simple, effective solutions to complex planning problems. Don't be paralyzed by fear of an unpredictable future. Make your best guesses based on current realities, industry trends and market knowledge. Then, document your conclusions in both graphic and narrative form, and have stakeholders in your organization review and comment on them. A master plan is a tangible vision for the future of your property and should be revisited annually so that it continues to reflect your group's best and latest thinking. Involve your staff,

as they will relish the opportunity to participate in a dialogue about future improvements to their everyday club environment.

3. Know Your Market: Club owners, looking to develop a better understanding of their markets, will often conduct focus groups composed of existing members. This can be a valuable exercise to help plan for future facility needs, but it is important to remember that this particular group has already found good reason to join your club. It may be more illuminating to consider the current attitudes and purchasing habits of non-members, who haven't found enough reason yet to join your club. This group's insights may be more instrumental and therefore, deserving of influence on your master plan for your club's market position.

4. Let the Creative Juices Flow: As you get into a master planning mindset, open your mind to creative possibilities. Question everything, especially an obvious solution. Will it really work? In a perfect world, how would you want it? Are there any alternatives? A good master plan considers multiple options before reaching a consensus.

5. Improvement Scenarios: There are basically three ways to improve your club property. Renovate or upgrade an existing area without changing the use, such as when you refurbish an existing locker room. Convert from one use to another, such as the conversion of an unused racquetball court to a spinning studio. Plus, expand your facility by creating new space for new uses or expansion space for existing uses. Your master plan should address all three possibilities as appropriate for your property.

6. Cost-Driven Compromise: It is the nature of master planning to imagine improvements with a no-cost benefit balance. (For example, you may be thinking, “If only we could relocate the transformer, we could expand our kid's club in its current location.” If moving the transformer costs \$100,000, the benefits may be outweighed by the cost and an alternative. So, a “compromised” solution for kid's club expansion should be considered.)

Any time you are working with an existing building, the value proposition must consider the real-cost benefit of any infrastructure changes. It is hard to point out your shiny new \$100,000 transformer to a prospective member and portray it as a reason to join. Given the reality of limited capital resources and projected improvements to future revenue streams, maximizing the bang for every buck may mean living with certain imperfect situations that are too expensive to rectify. Sometimes the most elegant solution to a master planning issue involves a “work-around” of an existing building component that is simply too expensive to relocate.

We have all chuckled knowingly at the cartoon of the shortsighted floor finisher who has just painted himself into a corner from which there is no escape, and short of trampling over his just-completed work. Club owners should resist the impulse to over-focus on only immediate needs. Master planning is just another term for “thinking ahead” – who can argue with that? **CS**

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