

Columbus Lowndes Recreation Authority Review

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PROJECT INTRODUCTION

In July 2016 the Lowndes County, Mississippi Board of Supervisors contracted with RF Outdoors LLC, to review the recreation services concerning the Columbus-Lowndes Recreation Authority (CLRA). The Scope of Services was to evaluate, explore and review the organization, finances, and efficiency, of the current Columbus-Lowndes Recreation Authority and provide recommendations.

The consultant was to review and provide recommendations on:

- A. Facility Assessment
- B. Programming
- C. Budget Analysis/Review
- D. Provide a brief summarization

These recommendations are submitted to be used by the policy-making body to make decisions concerning budgeting, programming, any future operations, capital improvements and future phased developments.

Considering the present concern over recreational issues, the Board of Supervisors hired RF Outdoors (RFO) to provide a review of the Recreation Authority concerning the overall park system in order to improve the quality of life of their residents in a more efficient manner.

The CLRA review includes a summary of past, current, and future governmental contributions as well as program revenues provided by the agency relative to Recreation Authority budgeting.

The review includes a brief parks and facility assessment, relative to maintenance operations, participant usage and the impact on facilities.

SECTION A. FACILITY ASSESSEMENT

During the review process RF Outdoors reviewed several parks within the Recreation Authority system. The intent here was to view the conditions of different facilities throughout the county. It should be noted that this was by no means an in-depth study of the park system but an opportunity to review a variety of grounds, fields, buildings and other support facilities at various locations. One of the most important aspects of parks management is maintenance of facilities. Facilities, grounds and buildings are a very substantial financial commitment by the tax payers. Turf management, preventive maintenance to buildings, HVAC systems, and infrastructure as well as playgrounds, trails, and pavilions is an expensive commitment but one that must be accepted in order to avoid large unnecessary future expenses, provide community aesthetics and above all safe play areas for all residents.

RFO visited a variety of parks on our own and with the Executive Director Greg Lewis. These were reviewed from the 30,000-foot level as opposed to a detailed and comprehensive view. We walked play fields, centers, playgrounds and other similar amenities throughout the system. Overall we found the parks to be in fair condition. Some better than others and some that need immediate attention. Issues such as lighting, playgrounds, turf maintenance, ADA access and some building maintenance need to be addressed through financial support from the funding governmental agencies to improve many areas within the system. It was noted that several playing fields were under-utilized.

SECTION A. FACILITY ASSESSEMENT, Cont.

From this short review there also were several playgrounds, tennis courts, and parks grounds that were in need of upgrading. All the community centers we visited were in good shape and the maintenance crew was doing a good job of keeping up with janitorial services and repair. One area of concern for us was a need for coordinated departmental planning consisting of what specifically needs to be done in the next fiscal year and what must be completed through future approved Capital plans. It is critical that the department provide this specific plan for all internal and external customers. The appointed Authority members and staff should immediately begin work on a Five Year Capital Improvements Plan and take steps to update the 1991 Parks Master Plan.

SECTION B. PROGRAMMING

The consultants only reviewed programming from a financial or fees position. There are a healthy number of activities offered through the park system at this time. RF Outdoors looked at the current number of participants as well as the amount of revenue produced with these activities. Baseball, softball, football, soccer, day camps, senior programs, and a variety of arts, crafts and instructional programs are being offered. Currently the agency brings in approximately \$45,000 revenue from these and other activities including concessions. It is important that elected officials review the amount of revenue produced vs the amount of tax money used to operate the department. Many communities consider programming opportunities on the same level as park facilities; these are benefits for living in the community and participation fees are not expected to cover all the costs of running the department. There are many communities that feel however that participants must pay their way and for programs to operate they must be self-supporting. This is a community decision and should be addressed in the department policy and procedure manual and the updated Parks Master Plan.

SECTION C. BUDGET ANALYSIS/REVIEW

During the Fiscal Years 2000-01 through 2014-15 Lowndes County provided \$8,565,880 compared to the City of Columbus contribution of \$8,245,084. The County's average contribution was \$571,059 a year however these contributions increased over this average beginning in year 2008-09 and have increased to a request of \$759,307 for FY-17. The County's share of operating funds has increase by 44% over these past 15 years. A review of capital commitments from Fiscal Years 1993-94 through 2014-15 reveals that the City of Columbus has contributed \$1,220,100 compared to Lowndes County that has contributed \$5,599,600.95. This is a difference of \$4,379,500 toward capital projects for CLRA. Capital contributions are crucial to any departments growth by providing necessary renovations and upgrades of existing facilities, replacement of out dated equipment, and new construction within the park system. The bulk of the county's contribution was for the purchase of land and the construction of the new soccer complex.

SECTION C. BUDGET ANALYSIS/REVIEW, Cont.

The current inventory of recreational facilities including community centers, playgrounds, pavilions, athletic fields, courts, and trails looks very healthy from a numbers standpoint, however as mentioned before there needs to be a financial commitment to upgrade a lot of these facilities. The one major issue that should be noted is the lack of baseball/softball fields where there is only one field available for play in the county. There are a number of fields in the city that are not utilized by the department for various reasons. RF Outdoors also reviewed conceptual plans for the renovation of current playing fields at Propst Park that including new surfaces, support facilities and lighting upgrades that would certainly improve current athletic fields and provide an opportunity to host a variety of tournaments for the community. The department needs to look at partnerships with other organizations in the county to provide additional playing fields for county residents.

SECTION D. SUMMERIZATION

Can the county provide its own recreation department, manage and maintain facilities, and provide similar or improved opportunities for county residents?

One area to consider with this question is youth and adult playing fields. The county will need to take on the financial responsibility to construct a sports complex for county leagues and tournaments. When considering this option, the county should provide for additional parkland property for future population growth. Generally speaking these complexes can become a major expenditure however to help control costs complexes can be phased in from year to year as demands rise or as additional funding is available. Costs can also be controlled by sensible design and engineering scopes on the front end of the project. Another option for the county would be to partner with Mississippi Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks to upgrade facilities and provide maintenance at Lake Lowndes State Park to provide playing fields for residents during the baseball/softball seasons. There is also an option for an agreement with Lowndes County Schools to utilize certain fields owned by the county for residents west of the river.

Further consideration should be given to the establishment of a management team or recreation department to operate and maintain the current facilities as well as the oversight of any future capital costs or agreements with other agencies. Issues that should be considered are establishing user fees to help offset and in most cases cover all programming costs that are offered by the county at all facilities. This should include all instructional classes, athletics, seniors, camps etc. The county could adopt the philosophy of “pay to play” when considering this endeavor.

SECTION D. SUMMERIZATION, Cont.

Additional options to offset costs are the usual grants that help with construction and the consideration of contracting services such as janitorial, concessions, mowing, and weed control. This allows the county to save all costs associated with having to take on the responsibility of hiring full-time personnel and it provides private vendors an opportunity to do business with the county.

Depending on the required level of maintenance by the elected officials and the ability to provide baseball/softball fields by either inter-local agreements or construction, it is completely realistic that the county could operate on the current and projected funding levels that have been reviewed.

The proposed FY-17 funding request of \$759,307 could allow for an operations budget of \$659,307 and provide at least \$100,000 to help retire debt for a \$2.0 million General Obligation Bond to begin construction of a new sports complex. All of this depends upon the county bonding capacity, ratings, and bond bids.

