

Advocacy for Public-Private Partnerships That Will Increase the Number of Fitness and Recreation Programs, Service Providers and Indoor Facilities In St. Mary's County, Maryland

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Despite population growth and a median household income that places St. Mary's County among the ten highest out of the 24 jurisdictions in Maryland, St. Mary's County is significantly behind the rest of the state when it comes to public and private indoor fitness and recreation facilities. (The top twelve Maryland counties by income are Montgomery, Howard, Anne Arundel, Calvert, Queen Anne's, Talbot, Frederick, Charles, Carroll, St. Mary's, Harford and Baltimore. The top twelve jurisdictions in order of population are Montgomery, Prince George's, Baltimore, Baltimore City, Anne Arundel, Howard, Frederick, Harford, Carroll, Charles, Washington, and St. Mary's.)

As the Healthy St. Mary's Partnership develops its 2026 local health improvement plan and continues work to achieve goals and objectives in the 2020 plan, I suggest the Healthy Eating and Active Living Action Team consider among its 2020 and 2021 priorities to advocate for **public-private partnerships that will increase the number of fitness and recreation programs, service providers, and indoor facilities in St. Mary's County**. An enhanced indoor fitness and recreation capacity can directly increase physical activity throughout the year, especially from October through April, and improve health and fight the obesity epidemic highlighted in data compiled by the Healthy St. Mary's Partnership.

Why public-private partnerships? Why can't either county government or private enterprises build and/or operate large sports facilities on their own? Private businesses have built indoor facilities in Maryland in the past and many are doing quite well, but new challenges have emerged. There are significantly more zoning and building restrictions for large commercial indoor recreation structures that don't apply to facilities built within public parks. Placement of indoor commercial recreation is very limited (often restricted to expensive town centers and industrial parks), and the large square footage and large building footprints mean such structures are often treated like "big box" retail stores with many extra fees required. Government-backed financing and infrastructure support is now often needed for a project to move forward. When it comes to managing and operating indoor facilities, sometimes the entrepreneurial spirit and enhanced customer service orientation of private operators are needed for success.

Underway in 2020 are at least four initiatives exploring this idea in St. Mary's:

- (1) **YMCA Exploratory Committee** - This county advisory committee appointed by the Commissioners is recommending that a community and recreation center be built, initially primarily with county government funds, but be managed and operated by YMCA of the Chesapeake at a location in the Lexington Park area. Jenna Guzman is the SMC Health Department representative on the committee. A feasibility study during 2020 will examine three committee-identified locations of property adjacent to the Lexington Park library, Nicolet Park, and property adjacent to Great Mills HS and the R&P swimming pool. Significant government funding is proposed and a public-private partnership appears to be the consensus for executing the project;

- (2) **St. Mary's County SportsPlex Feasibility Study** – With support of local state legislators such as State Senator Jack Bailey and with initial funding assistance by the County Commissioners and with work by the Maryland Stadium Authority and hired consultants, a study is underway to explore a large indoor and outdoor sports and recreation complex, likely in central or northern St. Mary's County. Various local stakeholders met with the consultants and Maryland Stadium Authority staff during the week of January 12. I attended such a meeting. The consultants will be working on this in the first half of 2020 and anticipate a report by June 30. Goals for the project include increased tourism and economic development as well as improved local resident physical fitness and health.

One model to consider for a sports complex in St. Mary's County (but on a smaller scale) is the **South Germantown Recreational Park**. The 695-acre park owned by M-NCPPC Montgomery Parks includes facilities for hiking, biking, archery, miniature golf, swimming, soccer, tennis, adventure play and more. The park was developed using public-private partnerships. While some outdoor tennis courts at the park are provided directly by the Montgomery Parks, the Montgomery TennisPlex with 8 indoor and 4 outdoor courts is privately operated. However, the Indoor Swim Center is operated directly by the Montgomery County Department of Recreation. The Maryland SoccerPlex is run by the Maryland Soccer Foundation. The SoccerPlex has 22 outdoor soccer fields (also used for lacrosse and field hockey), a lighted stadium, and a large indoor Discovery Sports Center with multiple indoor fields for soccer, lacrosse and field hockey, plus courts for basketball and volleyball;

- (3) **Sport-specific specialized indoor fitness and recreation facilities**, such as an Indoor Tennis Center in the central or northern part of St. Mary's County. Such specialized indoor facilities may or may not be included as part of a proposed YMCA project or broad SportsPlex project, may be sited at different locations than the YMCA or a field-focused SportsPlex, and involve different partners.

As an example of a public-private partnership for this kind of facility, Anne Arundel County has approved funding for an 8-indoor and 8-outdoor tennis court facility in **Millersville**. This is a tennis-focused central county park where the county is funding all site preparation, stormwater management, parking, sewage disposal and restroom facilities, and other infrastructure and maintenance, and the county R&P will build and operate the outdoor courts. However, the 8 indoor tennis courts at this county park will be built and leased long-term to a private operator;

- (4) **Future general community and recreation facilities in the central and northern parts of St. Mary's County** – While the YMCA Exploratory Committee is focusing on the Lexington Park area for the initial broad-based community and recreation indoor facility, there is identified need for more indoor facilities in other areas over the long term.

In February or March, I am suggesting the HEAL Action Team and the Healthy St. Mary's Partnership endorse as a policy the general concept of increasing the number of fitness and recreation programs, service providers and indoor facilities in St. Mary's County through public-private partnerships. The specific proposals by groups such as the YMCA Exploratory Committee and the St. Mary's County SportsPlex Feasibility Study are still under development. But we should be ready to review such proposals as they appear in order to consider future recommendations and action.