CNCN Study for Active Recreational facilities for East Lake un-incorporated area

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Recreational sports facilities for children are typically provided by the various cities around the Pinellas County. Of the 24 cities in Pinellas county most provide government sponsored or funded facilities for the youth. These are typically multipurpose sports facilities providing space for Baseball, Soccer, Basketball and Flag & Tackle Football programs. In Pinellas County's 2005 study titled Recreation, Open Space and Culture System Master Plan they make the following commitments.

4. Provide an "Urban Level" of Active Recreation Facilities for Citizens in Unincorporated Areas
In addition to its role as the leader in County-wide Systems, the County is also responsible for meeting the recreation needs of residents in unincorporated areas. The County currently meets this responsibility through partnerships with municipalities and nonprofit organizations, as well as through the establishment of a Municipal Services Taxing Units (MSTU) which funds approximately $2,000,000/year in grants to municipalities and reimbursement of nonresident fees to unincorporated County residents. However the County will need to expand its efforts in the coming years in order to keep up with demand, particularly with regard to active recreation facilities such as community centers, community parks, and sports complexes. Initiatives to be considered include the development of two (2) regional sports complexes to serve the entire county; the identification of new sources of funding for operations and maintenance costs; and the dedication of full-time County staff to partner proactively with municipalities, the School Board, and non-profit agencies.

The north Pinellas area known as East Lake has no county or city provided recreational sports facilities. This area contains approximately 33,000 residents with no publicly funded sports facilities. Part of the reason for this is that the East Lake residents are located in the un-incorporated area with no city representation and limited county representation. Conversely virtually every one of the 24 cities in the county provides land, facilities, and funding for ongoing maintenance for multi sport facilities for their residents children.

For the past 25 years the privately funded and run East Lake Youth Sports Association (ELYSA) has built and managed a multisport facility for the youths in the area through player fees, private fundraisers and donations. They have built an enterprise that supports the youth of the area in the current facilities off of Old Keystone road. For the past 8-10 years they have tried to expand their current facility with the county's assistance due to safety concerns at the overcrowded facility. With the number of youths increasing over the past two decades the ability to provide a safe sports environment for all youth that would like to participate in sports has become a problem.

In 2003 the ELYSA was provided an additional 38 acres in a contiguous property in the Brooker Creek Preserve to expand their fields by Pinellas County. This property was never developed and subsequently the county rescinded the agreement to provide that property in 2007/2008. Another deal was attempted to expand their facility by allocating a portion of the School Boards middle school property at the SE corner of East Lake road and Keystone Road. This property has not yet been developed due the expense associated with problems with wet land mitigation.

With the recent availability of the 870+ acre Eldridge-Wilde well field property contiguous to the current ELYSA facility, the county once again is attempting to provide land to help expand the sports facilities. After discussions

with the county environmental departments who maintain the Brooker Creek Preserve, and discussions with the various environmental watchdog groups, the county has proposed allocating a portion of the 870+ acre purchase to be used for recreational purposes and the remaining 770+ acres to the Brooker Creek Preserve. The purchase of the Wilde Trust property will be separated into two different purchases using two different funding sources to finally provide the missing contiguous land to complete the Preserve and at the same time finally provide a public recreational facility for the youth in the 33,000 resident East Lake area of the county. The funding for the recreational portion of the Wilde trust purchase will come from the Penny for Pinellas which is received through the sales tax penny much of which comes from tourists.

CNCN has had meetings with the County Commission and County Administrator during the past year in an attempt to help secure a viable location for a youth sports facility for the East Lake area youth. The officials we spoke with seem to have a positive attitude towards finding a win-win solution for the youth while taking the concerns of citizens that will be near the facility needs into consideration. These officials are trying to balance the need to provide some facilities for youth with the scarce availability of land in the East Lake corridor. Had the county provided for the recreational facilities during the building boom of the 80's and 90's or required developers to set aside the necessary property for recreation we would not have this issue today.

CNCN has also met with the ELYSA Board of Directors to discuss their goals in this process. They indicated that they hope the current proposal for the Wilde Trust property goes through as they have waited for many years and through various properties proposals and still have no new fields. Their biggest concern is finding additional space to be able to have a safer facility for the youth. During the discussions they provided the following statistics on the residences of the youth playing there. The percentage of youth living in Pinellas County is: Baseball – 100%, Soccer -90%, Football & Cheerleading – 90%. The need for new fields is not a desire to bring in huge numbers of new children; it is to provide a safer facility for the existing children. There may be additional children participate in the new facilities over time but a large growth is not anticipated. They indicated that their goal is to work with the county in the design of the fields to provide a safe place for the existing children while developing an ecologically green facility that would be sensitive to the nearby resident's quality of life. They have indicated that they would like a peaceful solution to the concerns of the nearby residents and would be willing to work with them to find the best solution for both groups.

It is our opinion that the needs of the Pinellas County East Lake residents would be best served by expeditiously finding and developing youth sports recreation facilities in the East Lake area. The benefits of providing team sports facilities for children provide important recreation and character building avenues while also giving the children somewhere constructive to be. It is proven that youth sports can be a deterrent to keep youths from getting into trouble. Team sports also build a sense of community and provide social benefits of team competition. Existing communities tend to prefer that new recreational youth sports facilities are not placed next to their neighborhood, but unfortunately there are not many undeveloped parcels of land large enough to accommodate a multisport recreational facility in the East Lake corridor. With limited land availability the remaining few choices have to be seriously considered.

The Wilde trust property opens a viable option for this development. It is a large enough property to accommodate the needed fields plus it provides a significant buffer for the adjacent residents. With proper layout and design of the property it is likely that the new fields will be further away from the residential area than the current fields are. The county planning department promises a green design for the property which will minimize the intrusion to nearby residents. They are also willing to build in a 200' wide natural vegetation area

with berms, trees and other environmentally green vegetation to reduce sounds and lights from the new facility. The county is also considering adding a new road into the property just east of Old Keystones east loop which will significantly reduce the traffic on the adjacent residents on Old Keystone road. They will also consider the request by ELYSA to potentially close the current access road off Old Keystone road and force all traffic through the new East entrance. If this is possible it will eliminate any sports related traffic on Old Keystone road. We found the county officials very willing to design the facility to minimize the impact on the area.

CNCN would recommend that the county proceed with purchase of the Eldridge-Wilde property and develop a portion into a sensible green facility providing additional active recreation areas while ensuring the nearby residents are provided a viable buffer so their quality of life is not noticeably impacted.

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