



PHOTO BY ANDREW MORGAN.

A joint use agreement between Bryant and its school system gives competitive swimmers access to the city-owned aquatic center.

Joint use agreements improve access to local amenities

By Greta Hacker

Recreational opportunities have a direct effect on the economic vitality of communities. Easier access to recreation can improve citizens' well being, which makes for a healthier and happier workforce. In addition, strategically planned and maintained built environments can increase a community's desirability to attract potential residents, bringing more economic activity into the area.

Local leaders are improving community access to recreational spaces through the adoption of formal policies known as joint use agreements (JUA). Enacted in tandem by two or more government entities (usually a school and a city government), the JUA outlines the provisions for shared utilization of public recreational facilities. Many of these agreements allow for expanded use of school or community facilities (gymnasiums, playgrounds, basketball or tennis courts, and walking tracks). This includes making school facilities open to the public after school hours and allowing school groups to use public recreation centers as spaces to exercise. In some cases, localities adopt JUAs to encourage the construction or renovation of recreational spaces in their communities.

Although JUAs can work in many different communities, this technique is especially useful in smaller cities and towns with government entities and school

districts that have difficulty providing funding or resources for recreational space on their own. The city of Lake Village exemplifies this type of community. Although Lake Village has many assets, maintaining and improving those assets can be challenging given competing city needs, like sewer and water improvements. Through a JUA, the city is immersed in planning to construct a multi-use sports field on a 12-acre plot of undeveloped city-owned land. School sports teams in Lake Village will practice and compete in this new public recreational area.

Dr. Jennifer Conner, regional program associate for obesity reduction at the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, spoke to the JUA's success in helping Lake Village make more efficient use of its assets. Conner noted that the JUA arose out of an issue of insufficient space for school sports leagues.

"This planning process helped our city consider how to best use community space in the absence of school resources," Conner said. "This project also raised the question, 'What does community shared space look like?' and prompted us to more strategically plan land use in our community."

The Lake Village City Council has adopted a formal joint use policy. Conner emphasized that the city is excited to propel the multi-use field initiative forward and

to continue developing strategies for creating innovative recreational spaces.

Many communities in Arkansas have utilized this technique to improve access to recreation in a variety of ways. For example, the city of Bryant entered into an agreement that allowed their high school swim team to utilize a community aquatics center. This gave high school athletes greater opportunities to succeed through access to a proper practice and competition facility. Another example of this policy's success is in the city of Springdale, which adopted a JUA to construct walking tracks around school-owned playgrounds. This allowed for adults to safely exercise in tandem with their children and facilitated more efficient use of community space.

The Arkansas Department of Education offers numerous resources for communities looking to improve access to recreation through its JUA grant program. About 15 Arkansas communities a year receive up to \$30,000 to support projects that increase community access to recreational space. The program also directs resources to areas that need them most by awarding grants to communities with low income and high levels of obesity.

Jerri Clark, school health services director at the Arkansas Department of Education, explained that the grant program is particularly effective in helping develop long-term investments in community health.

"The joint use agreement program aims to increase access to physical activity through a sustainable partnership. It helps schools and community partners formalize the process of sharing recreational space and supports efficient, continuous collaboration," Clark said. "Through this program, communities can work towards putting foundational pieces in place for more effective use of their existing resources."

Many communities across the state can benefit from the intentional planning and meaningful collaboration JUAs facilitate. To learn more about what your community can do to put a JUA into practice and receive grant funding, contact Jerri Clark at jerri.clark@arkansas.gov.



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