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City of Solon Develops Strategic Plan for Parks and Recreation Department

SOLON, OH – (November 4, 2019) The City of Solon Parks and Recreation Department recently completed a comprehensive strategic planning process that began in the spring of 2019. The goal of the initiative was to create opportunities and engagement that would allow the department to remain proactive in its planning for the future.

“Our mission is to provide for the leisure needs of all the citizens of Solon and enhance the quality of life for our residents by offering active and passive recreation programs in a clean, safe and appealing environment, and this strategic plan will help us accomplish those goals,” said Solon’s Director of Recreation Donald Holub. “We are so thankful for the community’s input during this planning process and are excited to develop new programs and systems that will benefit our residents.”

As part of the strategic planning process, the Parks and Recreation Department collected feedback from the community through an online survey and personal interviews with city leaders. They also conducted eight focus groups with diverse community stakeholders to ensure a variety of opinions were gathered.

Five goals were established as part of the strategic plan. They include: communication, recruiting, retaining and training high-quality personnel, facilities, finance and accountability, and education, programming and events. Each goal has several objectives as well as action steps and personnel who will monitor the progress of each step and the overall plan.

“By establishing this strategic plan, we have a clear path to completing our goals and providing innovative, fun and engaging programs to the community,” said Community Center Manager Rich Parker. “This is a very exciting time for all of us and we know that the residents will benefit from the results of this initiative.”

For more information on the City of Solon, please visit solonohio.org.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



PARKS AND RECREATION



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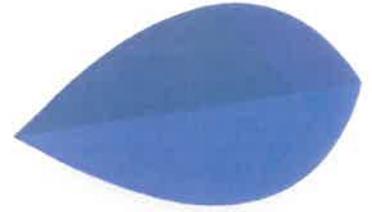
Introduction

In February 2019, the Solon Parks & Recreation Department (Parks & Rec) elected to partner with The Impact Group (IGPR), a marketing and communications firm located in Hudson, Ohio, to assist in the facilitation and creation of a new five-year strategic planning initiative. Parks & Rec and IGPR agreed to work collaboratively to engage Parks & Rec staff as well as a diverse set of community stakeholders in an effort to better understand the department's challenges, standing and identity within the Solon community and beyond. This comprehensive project centered its focus on several goals:

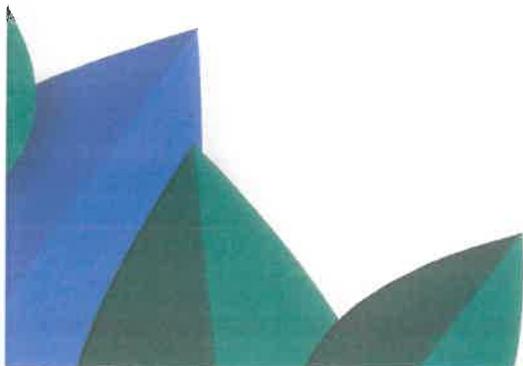
- Discovery of departmental strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats
- Increased trust and collaboration between patrons, staff members, administration and all community stakeholders
- Enhanced quality of experience for those served by Parks & Rec
- Planning for the future of Parks & Rec, while maintaining a commitment to time-honored traditions, current initiatives and programming

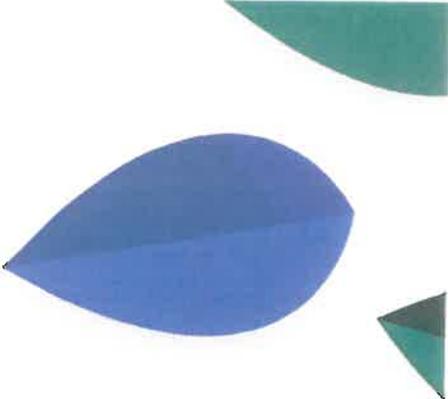
To realize goal achievement, The Impact Group first engaged in a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis with the Parks & Rec executive leadership team to gain an administrative perspective of the department. IGPR and Parks & Rec then partnered to conduct focus group interviews with various stakeholder groups to gain a more complete and methodical understanding of the department from multiple vantage points. An online survey was also created to provide a mechanism for feedback for those unable to attend a focus group meeting. In all, Parks & Rec was able to achieve an abundance of data points to inform their plan.

After thorough analysis, breakdown and disaggregation of available data, The Impact Group outlined commonalities represented in stakeholder feedback. Additionally, IGPR prioritized outcomes to best align with available resources while remaining cognizant of time constraints and other factors that might affect strategy implementation.



Together, IGPR and the Parks & Rec executive leadership team will utilize available data to create and inform a new strategic plan to assist the department in their efforts to optimize efficiency now and in the future, enhance patron experience, boost employee satisfaction, communicate effectively with all stakeholders and provide a world-class environment for the community of Solon.





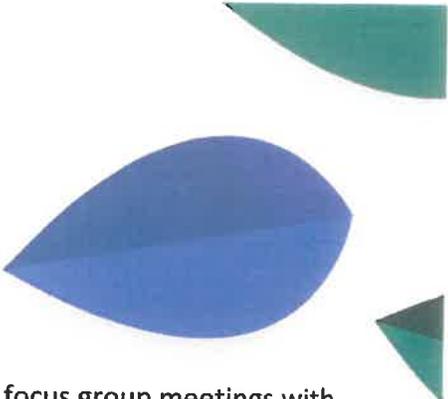
Summary Report

Background/Focus Group Interviews

Prior to project launch, The Impact Group met with the Parks & Rec executive leadership team to better understand the history and dynamics of the department from an administrative perspective. A breakdown of organizational ***strengths*** included: Parks & Rec facilities; offering outstanding and well-rounded programming; a dedicated, caring, compassionate and resourceful leadership team; a commitment to fiscal responsibility in decision-making; a pledge to provide a safe and secure environment; a willingness to listen to the needs of staff and patrons; and a desire to collaborate and integrate with community partners. Identified ***areas for improvement*** and/or ***challenges*** included: lack of Parks & Rec “branding”; inconsistent brand identity; undefined external communications strategy; inconsistent application of employee accountability standards; deficit in understanding the programming desires of the community; and insufficient training for job and behavioral expectations.

Additionally, the executive leadership team noted ***opportunities*** for organizational growth in several key areas. These included: fostering additional partnerships and collaborative experiences with Solon City Schools, local businesses and the community at large; increasing consistency with branding efforts; and increasing presence and awareness in the digital communications space (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc.)

It is evident that the Parks & Rec leadership team desires a clean, comfortable and productive atmosphere for patrons, a high-expectations environment for staff and a shared understanding with community partners as it relates to the department’s vision for the future. This includes: staff members and administrators working collaboratively and on the “same page” to provide excellent service; a high level of community and stakeholder satisfaction; and a climate and culture that is encouraging and accepting for all.



Focus Group Interviews

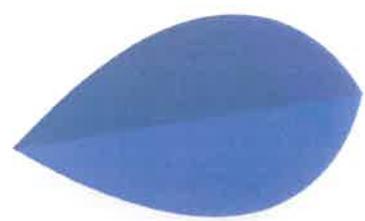
Throughout March and April, 2019, The Impact Group conducted/facilitated focus group meetings with various Parks & Rec stakeholder groups. The focus groups included: Solon Parks and Recreation Department staff members; Solon Community Center patrons; community business and civic leaders; and multiple general community stakeholder meetings. Additionally, the outreach process included an option to complete an online survey to provide feedback as well as targeted phone interviews with members of Solon City Council. It is important to note that every attempt was made to speak with all individuals who could provide feedback regarding their personal experience and perspective of Parks & Rec. Focus group interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 75 minutes depending on the amount of dialogue and feedback provided – participants were not asked to stop based on a pre-determined time allotment. It quickly became evident to IGPR that focus group participants were not hesitant in providing comments and opinions. Several participants made remarks that they were grateful to have an opportunity to discuss the future of Parks & Rec. This is to be celebrated as an example of Parks & Rec's willingness and desire to improve and, subsequently, take a reflective stance with critical feedback.

The following questions were utilized to gain feedback regarding the department. It should be noted that certain questions are independently applicable and were used in isolation while others are cross-categorical.

1. In a general sense, how are things going in the Solon Parks & Rec. Department? What immediately comes to mind when you are asked this question?
2. What are the strengths of the Solon Parks & Rec. Dept.?
3. As community leader, how do you feel the Solon Parks & Rec. Dept. can act as a better, more collaborative partner? Are there missed opportunities in terms of shared services or partnerships with other local organizations?
4. Do you feel the Solon Parks & Rec. Dept. does a good job with its efforts of external communication?

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5. Overall, how would you describe the quality of services and programming being provided by the Solon Parks & Rec. Dept.?
 6. Does the Solon Parks and Rec. Dept. offer a good value for your tax dollar?
 7. Do you have a sense of the Solon Parks & Rec. Dept.'s reputation and/or standing within the community? (i.e. – does the greater Solon community take great pride in the department? Not value this service? Do the department just blend in?
 8. How do you prefer the Solon Parks & Rec. Dept. communicate with you? What about other stakeholders?
 9. What types of programming are most utilized? Are there any programs that do not currently exist that you wish would be adopted?
 10. What are some of Solon Parks & Rec's challenges or focus areas for improvement?
 11. How would you rate the physical condition of Solon Parks & Rec. Dept. facilities?
 12. Do you feel Solon Parks & Rec. Dept. facilities are safe and secure? What specifics do you wish were addressed?
 13. Do you feel that Solon Parks & Rec. Dept. staff members are knowledgeable, courteous and responsive? If not, how can customer service improve?
 14. Are Solon Parks & Rec. Dept. facilities clean and well maintained?
 15. Where would you like Solon Parks & Recreation Dept. to be in five years?
 16. What other information would you like me to deliver to the Solon Parks & Rec. Dept. leadership team?

As is often the case, certain questions elicited a greater emotional response from focus group participants, resulting in extended and more thorough feedback. Questions *one, five, nine, and ten* proved most beneficial to The Impact Group – participants seemed to reflect deeply and thoughtfully when considering their answers to these particular questions. It is important to note that there were no instances where a question went unanswered. All focus group participants remained professional and respectful throughout the interview process.

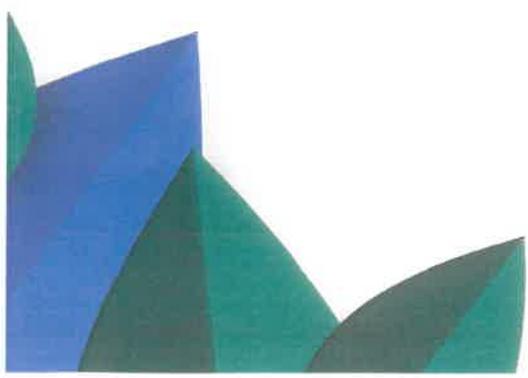


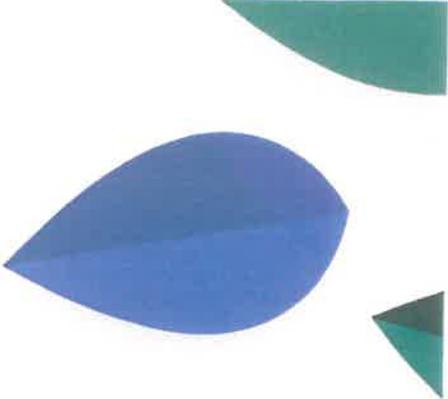
It is essential to consider a recurring phenomenon prior to engaging in a breakdown of focus group feedback. First, certain responses (within certain contexts) can be viewed concurrently as both *positive* and *negative*. For example, several Parks & Rec stakeholders view current programming opportunities as engaging, rigorous and fun. In other words, these stakeholder's view programming as a positive strength. Conversely, others find programming dated, non-engaging and of low quality (i.e. these stakeholder's view programming as a weakness that needs to be addressed.) Several staff members stated that they receive appropriate and timely communication from their supervisors. Other staff members described internal methods of communication as ineffective and sporadic. As such, one will find topics included in the breakdown with a shared connotation that is both positive and negative.

The most frequently mentioned topics/items with a **positive** association include: wide variety of programming options; proactive response to community wishes and concerns; serves a wide range of ages and abilities; safe facilities and well-trained coaches; and serves as a source of community pride/central gathering place

The most frequently mentioned topics/items with a **negative** association include: aging facilities that do not meet current needs and expectations (space); customer service inefficiencies; cleanliness of restrooms/locker rooms; equipment replacement needs; diversify methods of communication (internal & external); and increased adult and special needs programming options

The most frequently mentioned topic/items with a **neutral** or **undetermined** association include: increased training opportunities for staff; increased collaboration with senior center; increased collaboration with local business; and consideration of "signature" events





Frequency & Trends:

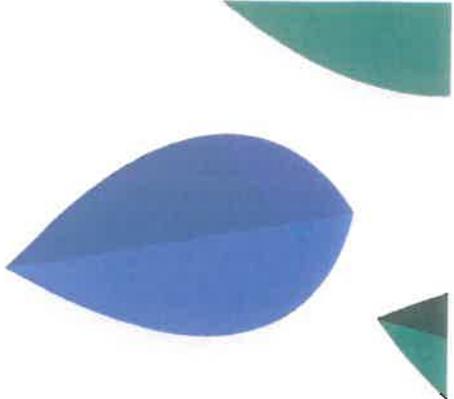
Communication (Internal/External)

Positives:

- Strong relationships are established and maintained within the community and with Solon City Schools
- Overall, there is a positive community perception
- The community wants to help the center reach its full potential and become a continuous source of pride
- Residents receive the communications materials and pay attention to informational materials that are sent out
- External communication has improved over the last 12 months
- The brochure/book that comes out twice a year is useful
- Participants appreciated the opportunity to give feedback

Areas of Improvement:

- Need to establish a consistent “brand” strategy (messaging, etc.)
- Inconsistent external communication strategy and application; lacks diverse methods
- Online registration platform is not user-friendly
- Create/expand community-based partnerships (schools, business. etc.)
- Increase effectiveness of website & email lists for communication purposes
- Ensure timely response to email and suggestion box items; respond to criticisms
- Need for interdepartmental meetings at regular intervals
- Produce welcome packets for new families/businesses
- Improve internal communications; different answers from different staff members for same question
- Ensure real time changes to program schedule (classes cancelled, added or time changed)



Recruiting, Retaining & Training of High-Quality Personnel

Positives:

- High quality teachers, coaches and instructors
- Caring management
- Center is staffed efficiently
- Classes are well-run and fresh with new activities

Areas for Improvement:

- Customer service model improvement and training (front desk)
- Unmotivated workforce
- Lack of accountability
- Increase staff knowledge of all general services and departments

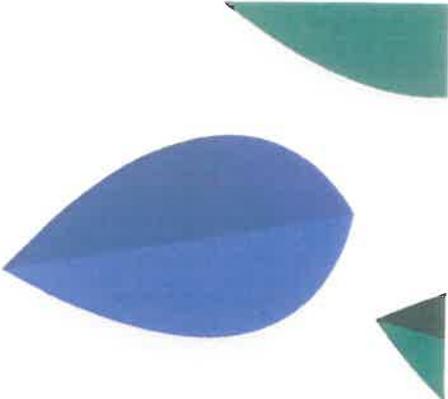
Finance & Accountability

Positives:

- Membership dues are fair
- Senior pricing is very affordable
- Residents feel that the facilities are worth their tax dollars

Areas for Improvement:

- Proactive budgeting plan
- Innovative sponsorship opportunities
- Seek grants for new programming and equipment
- Financial commitment plan for deferred maintenance
- Eliminate separate rates for membership, group classes and childcare – one comprehensive fee



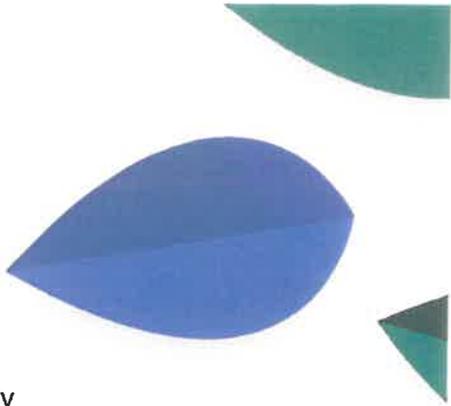
Education, Programming & Events

Positives:

- There is extensive programming/wide range of activities
- Programming is applicable to a variety of visitors (addresses all ages)
- New programming options are offered frequently
- Hosted events are thoroughly enjoyed and bring a sense of excitement and community to visitors
- The Blue Ribbon and Safety Town programming is appreciated and important to many families
- There is a vast amount of youth sports programs and programming that engages children
- The ability to sign up for programming online has been well-received

Areas for Improvement:

- Offer adult swim lessons
- Create a Pickleball league
- Vary the activities during summer camp
- After school, teen-only class options
- More adult league options
- Whole-family programming, adults and kids together
- Day programming needs to be offered again in the evenings (2x day cycle)
- Increased programs for persons with special needs (specifically ages 3-12)
- Adaptive options for safety town
- Program audit to reveal gaps based on age
- Innovative/creative new programming – programming too stagnant; study other facilities
- Hiking and biking trail programming; group rides, runs etc.
- More general health initiatives (weight loss contests, diabetes, etc.)
- Create signature event(s) (i.e. concert in the park, etc.)
- Consider family movie/game nights
- Specialized winter break and spring break programs while students are out of school



Facilities

Positives:

- The availability of meeting space is a new feature that residents enjoy
- There is a great range of exercise equipment with timely repairs if something breaks
- Overall, the facilities feel safe
- The Senior Center is a staple of the community and enjoyed by many
- The pools and indoor track are valuable to many residents
- The recent landscaping around the facilities is appreciated
- Overall, residents see the Rec as a nice facility with a lot of potential

Areas for Improvement:

- Focus on increased safety/security (locker room theft)
- General space expansion at community center (weight room)
- Community room rental is too expensive
- Commitment to clean and well-maintained areas (cleaner locker rooms, restrooms)
- Parking is an issue when a special event takes place
- Dedicated Pickleball courts
- Timely equipment repair
- Create equipment replacement schedule
- Lap swimming is difficult – water not deep enough, not enough lanes
- More benches at playgrounds and ball fields
- Open a “Splash Pad” area
- Expand hours at community center
- Rec. pool chairs & umbrellas upgrade; increase shaded areas at pool
- Basketball court overcrowding
- Outdoor pool overcrowding