Michigan Municipal League

Clark Park Coalition
PROJECT SCOPE:
While other Detroit recreational centers have closed and struggled, this grass-roots, nonprofit coalition has grown to offer positive activities for nearly a thousand neighborhood youth each year. The Clark Park Coalition now offers one of the nation’s only free inner-city hockey programs, as well as quality soccer, baseball, softball, and tennis activities, in addition to providing summer and after-school youth programming.

Accomplishments:
- Over the past 20 years, while most of the city’s recreation centers have closed, the Coalition has kept the park’s recreation center open, while continually improving the facility and expanding recreational opportunities.
- Through a unique partnership, the city of Detroit maintains responsibility for mowing and general maintenance of the park, while the Coalition has assumed responsibility for programming and capital improvements to the facilities.
- The Clark Park Coalition maintains exclusive responsibility for capital improvements to the facility, including the only regulation-sized outdoor ice hockey rink in Metro Detroit, and eight new tennis courts.
- In a given year, the Coalition provides over 1,200 children in one of Detroit’s poorest neighborhoods opportunities to participate in a diverse array of organized sports, including soccer, ice hockey, lacrosse, tennis, golf, baseball, softball, and volleyball.

PROJECT DETAILS:
NAME: Clark Park Coalition
DATE: 1991-present
LOCATION: Detroit
THE GIST: A group of neighbors, threatened with the closure of their local recreation center, formed a partnership with the city to take over programming and capital improvements in order to keep the center open, and an asset for their community.
Through the Coalition's soccer programs, over 400 kids participate in the most active soccer league in the city of Detroit each year.

The Coalition provides after-school tutoring and a wide array of cultural programming for youth, including storytelling, arts and crafts, and introduction to filmmaking and photography.

During summer months, free, daily lunches are provided for over 100 neighborhood youth.

Over the last two years, at a time when the district has been closing a significant number of buildings, the vibrancy of the park led the Detroit Public Schools to invest over $50 million in a revamped high school and a new middle school immediately adjacent to the park.

Budget:
The Clark Park Coalition currently operates with two full-time employees and an annual operating budget of roughly $250,000.

Funding:
The Coalition is primarily funded through competitive grants from local foundations and public funds (CDBG grants), public fundraising efforts largely through a maintained list of regular donors, and increasingly through local corporations. Participation fees make up less than ten percent of the annual budget.

Organization:
The Clark Park Coalition operates as a 501c3, with a nine member board made up primarily of neighbors of the park. The board meets every other month. The board has committees for finance, programming, and maintenance, as well as an ad hoc group for appointing new board members. Each board member is expected to participate in a committee that meets alternating months.

Participants:
The group consisting of a half-dozen dedicated local residents assisted by a few local business owners, city officials and nonprofit leaders were key to the formation of the Coalition. In addition to the nine board members, a dozen additional volunteers work on specific committees. The Coalition employs an executive director, a programming director, and a part-time chief operating officer, who oversees the financial and organizational needs of the Coalition. Due to a grant from the Skillman Foundation, the Coalition employs a part-time bookkeeper and a part-time grant writer. The Coalition relies heavily upon nearly a half-dozen veteran volunteers that commit more than 10 hours per week to the park, plus dozens of coaches and mentors. Depending on funding, the park also employees one AmeriCorps volunteer and up to 10 neighborhood kids to assist in cleaning and various mentoring activities.

Inspiration:
By the 1980s, Clark Park had earned the nickname “Crack Park” due to rising crime, high grass, gang activity, and general disinvestment in the facility and surrounding area. In the fall of 1991, after years of declining city budgets and general neglect to the Clark Park recreational center, the city of Detroit finally announced that it would shut down the facility. Realizing the park was an asset and that a vacant recreation center would only accelerate blight in the neighborhood, local residents stepped up to take over the facility and programming.
Actions Taken:

1) **APPRECIATE YOUR PUBLIC SPACE AND ASSETS:**

   In the decade before the Clark Park Coalition was formed, a volunteer Hubbard Farms community development corporation existed in the surrounding neighborhood. This group recognized that a safe and inviting Clark Park was essential to viability of the neighborhood and formed a Clark Park Committee to improve the park and to avoid its further decline.

2) **ORGANIZE EARLY, WITH MODEST GOALS:**

   In the early years, the Clark Park committee was comprised of a handful of committed neighbors of the park. Their initial goals were modest and included encouraging residents to use the park again by hosting picnics and working with a local high school to get students to clean up the facility.

3) **GET THE KEYS AND KEEP THE DOORS OPEN:**

   When word came from the city that the park was closing, the committee immediately approached the staff at the park about getting keys to the facility. Realizing that it would be hard to reopen a facility and what could happen to the structure if abandoned, the group formed a constant schedule of core volunteers to staff the recreation center and keep it open.

4) **DEVELOP THE PARTNERSHIPS:**

   The core group of volunteers would not have been able to move beyond those tenuous first weeks without rallying the support of local business and community leaders. A prominent business owner in the neighboring community convinced the city to allow the neighbors to keep the center open and for the city to continue taking responsibility for certain maintenance costs. The director of a local YMCA volunteered his organization to act as the fiduciary for the group and coordinated work-release residents in his facility to help with maintenance at the park.
5) RECRUIT KEY VOLUNTEERS AND RECOGNIZE THEIR LIMITATIONS:
Clark Park’s success can be tied directly to the team of volunteers that have contributed to the organization’s administration as well as programming. Volunteers have been recruited based on their involvement with a particular sport or through their sentimental attachment to the space. Not only were the number and quality of the volunteers key, but also the length that they have been with the organization, in many cases since the beginning of the Coalition over 20 years ago. Within a few months, the Coalition realized it would not be able to operate with just a volunteer staff and a director was hired through a nonprofit in the neighborhood acting as a fiduciary. Later, additional staff was supplemented through partnering nonprofits.

6) ORGANIZE FOR STABILITY:
After nearly a decade in existence, the Coalition realized there were limitations to its fundraising and growth without having control of its own finances. The board ended its relationship with its fiduciaries, pursued 501c3 tax status, and performed an audit of its finances. The audit allowed the organization to obtain CDBG money and foundation grants, which have led to a greater professionalization of staff with the hiring of a chief operating officer and a contractual bookkeeper and grant writer. This additional staff has allowed more staff time to be dedicated to programming as well as board efforts to focus on fund development.

7) RECOGNIZE YOUR PARTNERS:
The Clark Park story would not have happened without the willingness of the city of Detroit to let a group of citizens run one of its facilities. The Coalition would never have been able to meet the programming needs of the community if the city did not continue to mow the park’s grass and cover the utility costs of the recreation center. It was not until Detroit’s latest financial crises in 2012 that the city and Coalition developed a formal partnership with a Memorandum
of Understanding (see attached) in which the community group assumed the responsibility of programming in the recreation center as well as the cost of the center’s utilities and general maintenance of the facility. Consistently remembering the contributions of a partner like the city is a key to maintaining good relations, as well as recognizing your organization’s own limitations.

Obstacles and Lessons Learned:

➢ Establish a clear understanding, ideally in the form of a MOU, between the public entity that owns the facility and the community group. This will help avoid confusion and potential conflicts that may arise over time regarding responsibilities.

➢ Recognizing the importance of personnel stability, whether volunteers or staff. Do your best to respect the efforts of volunteers to ensure they continue coming back because they are your lifeline.

➢ Do not put off creating a formal organization structure. Delaying audits and legal status will limit your ability to funding from foundations and public institutions.

Experts:

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The Center for 21st Century Communities

Building 21st century communities
Experts from around the world—in academic, business, and public sectors alike—agree that investing in communities is a critical element to long-term economic development in the 21st century. Michigan’s future depends on its ability to attract and retain knowledge-based workers. Central to attracting this priceless commodity is place. Research proves that successful 21st century communities effectively leverage the assets summarized in this brochure. Learn more and stay engaged at mml.org.

Who we are...
The Michigan Municipal League is the one clear voice for Michigan communities. We are a nonprofit, but we act with the fervor of entrepreneurs; our people are dynamic, energetic, and highly approachable, passionately and aggressively pushing change to achieve better communities and a better Michigan.

What we know...
Never before have so many diverse interests, from academic researchers to the business community to government leaders, shared a single conclusion: Michigan’s future depends on its ability to attract knowledge-based workers. And what is central to attracting this priceless commodity? Place, specifically vibrant 21st century communities.

What we offer...
Through its Center for 21st Century Communities (21c3), the League provides education, technical assistance, public outreach, and unprecedented access to experts and resources. The 21c3 is a “one-stop-shop” for communities interested in creating and sustaining livable, desirable, and unique places that attract the highly skilled, creative, and talented workforce of the next century.