**Problem Assessment; the Challenge or Need That Promoted the Local Government to Develop the Program**

The City of Delaware, Ohio is a family-oriented community of nearly 40,000 people, that blends a traditional hometown atmosphere with a modern, independent spirit. Delaware’s authentic downtown, well-established neighborhoods and cooperative governance provides a solid foundation for an ideal living experience. But where the Central Ohio community fell short was the lack of a community recreation center.

Such a center is a valuable asset to any community. A hub of activity, a well-run center serves the needs of area youth, families, senior citizens, recreation departments, civic organizations and more. A vibrant center can have a stabilizing effect on the lives of young people. By providing safe and adequately equipped spaces for physical activities like dance, martial arts, yoga, basketball and other sports, community centers instill discipline, healthy exercise habits and teamwork in area youth. A top-notch center will also have dedicated rooms for social clubs and academic programs to supplement the school experience for students. Perhaps best of all, these opportunities are afforded to local youth and their parents at little to no charge, a significant benefit for those living on a fixed income.

By providing this kind of a common destination, centers make the communities that surround them more attractive. Families are more likely to move to a city that features a thriving community center. Property values are likely to be higher in an area where there is a center offering exciting activities and compelling programs.

Delaware leaders understood the vital role a center could play in the complete development of the community. Despite previous setbacks, they took up the challenge through a unique partnership with the Ohio Army National Guard, the YMCA of Central Ohio and a local citizens group**.**

**Program Implementation and Cost**

**This unique** partnership offered the most cost-effective way to build a state-of-the-art facility at a reduced cost. Ironically, it was a failed YMCA recreation center proposal in 1999 that helped put the wheels in motion. The Ohio Army National Guard’s presence in Delaware dates back more than 100 years, but its 1913 facility no longer met 21st century readiness requirements. Soon after the unsuccessful 1999 plan, the National Guard approached Delaware about a joint-use facility concept that had proven successful elsewhere. Seeing the opportunity for a first-class facility that met the community’s needs, Delaware began working more closely with the Guard on timelines and learning more about the joint-use concept, which included a trip to the Minneapolis area to visit similar facilities. The visit confirmed for city officials that a partnership with the National Guard could work and benefit the community. At the same time, aware of the YMCA’s continued interest in expanding into the attractive Delaware market, city leaders renewed relationships with the YMCA.

A fourth partner – the Delaware community – then stepped forward. Residents in 2008, organized as Citizens for Indoor Recreation, petitioned Delaware City Council to place an income tax levy on the ballot to fund the center’s construction. On August 5, 2008, residents approved the measure to increase the tax rate 0.15 percent, taking it from 1.4 percent to 1.55 percent.

The implementation plan was straight-forward: The City would pay to build the $14.2 million, center and contract with the YMCA, for $1 a year, to run it and be responsible for its maintenance and operation. The Guard would pay for and construct its training center and connect it to the community center. Guard space, including a large commercial kitchen, gymnasium and meeting rooms would be available for YMCA and community during the week and on non-drill weekends, (1-2 times per month). The 76,000 square-foot Delaware Community Center YMCA opened in 2011 and the 65,000 square-foot Ohio Army National Guard Training center in 2013 and are connected by a common hallway.

**Tangible Results or Measurable Outcomes of the Program**

The Delaware Community Center YMCA this year celebrates its 5th anniversary in Delaware. By any measure, the project has been a success. The Center boasts more 12,400 members and more than 2,000 users of all ages pass through its doors weekly, making it the YMCA’s second busiest center in Central Ohio. In 2016, scholarship subsidies in the amount $99,393 benefited approximately 1950 members.

National Guard facilities are well-used, as well. In 2017, for example, the drill space/gymnasium is playing host to a YMCA’s teen basketball league that has grown from 10 teams to 20 in just three years. The center is providing youth in the community a safe place to play, keeping them off the streets. In addition, the city regularly uses one of the three classrooms for employee training activities and the kitchen and gymnasium for its annual employee recognition breakfast.

Not only do people love going to the center, they are also willing to pay to live closer to it. New home construction near the Delaware center is on the rise and existing homes close to the center are increasing in property value. In the last five years, more than 200 new single-family homes have been constructed within a half-mile of the center in the popular Heatherton and Carson Farms subdivisions.

Finally, the opening of the center paved the way for the YMCA and the City of Delaware to enter into a first-of-its-kind agreement, whereby the YMCA now operates all of the city’s recreation programming. City and YMCA officials wisely saw that once the new center opened, some programming could be duplicated or run simultaneously and that competing programs could negatively impact both operations.

An agreement was reached whereby Delaware pays the YMCA an annual fee to manage its recreation programs; the YMCA also collects all programming fees. In return, the YMCA hires staff, develops programs, assesses results and resolves issues. The renewable contract is for three years and is reviewed annually by City Council. Since 2012, Delaware has reduced by approximately $537,000 what it contributes from the general fund toward recreational programming as a result of the YMCA contract. Residents have more program options than ever. The city offered 20 or fewer recreational programs with a staff of three; the YMCA now features more than 100 programs, including for the first time youth golf and junior soccer, with 10 full-time staff. Hours of operation have increased and the nonprofit status of the YMCA helps it keep existing programs in place and expand upon them while keeping fees low. And although the city recreation department was disbanded, collaboration between the two parties is strong and serves both the city and the YMCA well. The former city recreation programs director is now an associate director at the center and continues to serve on the city’s Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, providing updates on programs and events and receiving input from the city.

**Lessons Learned During Planning, Implementation, and Analysis of the Program**

Reaction to the Delaware Community Center YMCA and National Guard Training Center has been amazing, ranging from, “Wow!” when our Congressman spoke at the dedication to, “Now we can have exercise classes here.” The project moved along as quickly as possible – considering three partners as unique as local government, the military and a non-profit recreation provider. But, we did learn some important lessons:

* Be prepared for criticism. When the levy was approved and construction began, we thought everyone would be thrilled. Most were, but some opponents were quick with their criticism. Be prepared for criticism when you undertake any community-wide project that involves public funds.
* Build in Flexibility. Partnering with the National Guard required close work with the U.S. Defense Department and its very technical federal funding process. Again, this is where having productive and communicating cross-functional team’s pays off.
* Willingness to compromise. An undertaking of this size and scope requires a long-term view; savor every milestone. In our case, they sometimes came years apart, but every one gave us the confidence to continue.

**How the Program Raises Awareness of the Contributions of Local Government Managers**

The existence of the Delaware Community Center YMCA is testament to the commitment of local government to serve and work on behalf of its residents. The steadfast diligence of multiple Delaware City Councils and City Managers, over nearly 25 years, helped resolve a long-held community need. Having professional leadership, willing to pursue goals and objectives in the face of short-term or short-sighted opposition, is critical. This happens best when there is a consistent vision adopted by the legislative branch and strong, on-going relationships with community groups and partners. The City of Delaware leadership has these traits, leading directly to the success of projects such as the Delaware Community Center YMCA.