

Response to Questions on the FY 2005 Advertised Budget Plan

Request By: Supervisor DuBois

Question: The Fairfax County Park Authority is proposing to increase RECenter fees. What is the likely impact of such increases on RECenter usage? Can the Park Authority demonstrate that the increased fees will not diminish demand to the point where the Park Authority cannot recover its RECenter operating costs from RECenter fees?

Response: Prior experience from fee adjustments has demonstrated no negative impact to RECenter usage. Both income and visitation have continued to rise. Despite the fact that there have been no new RECenter facilities developed since the late 1980's, RECenter attendance grew from 1.370 million in 2000 to 1.514 million in 2003. RECenters have historically been - and continue to be - one of the most popular park facilities among Fairfax County residents. A 1997 survey showed that 52 percent of Fairfax households used RECenters annually and that percentage remained at 52 percent in a 2003 survey.

The Park Authority has adopted a practice of regular, modest fee adjustments (3-5 percent) to avoid the previous trend of relatively infrequent, but large, increases. This prior practice did have a more adverse impact on customers.

The Park Authority has an open process for consideration of fee changes that includes opportunity for public comment on proposed changes. Fee proposals are advertised at Park Authority sites, on the Park Authority web page, and through press releases. Citizens may write or email comments and have an opportunity to address the Park Authority Board at a public meeting. This year, and historically, there are very few comments regarding the proposed fee changes. In addition, before any fee changes are proposed, a comprehensive comparison of like facilities is conducted to ensure the RECenters remain competitive in the market. Careful consideration of the Park Authority's financial management plan is taken into account. Consideration of the financial management plan ensures our ability to continue to provide needed and desired services to our customers without placing undue burden on the RECenter user.

The RECenters regularly add services for customers (such as free fitness classes) that do not significantly impact operating costs but do add value to the customer's experience. Additionally, the Park Authority employs a flexible pricing system with regard to RECenters. Incentives such as the Health Heart pass sale and early registration discounts are regularly used to stimulate demand. These incentives also lower the actual cost of RECenter services for a large number of users when compared to the 'list' prices shown in the fee schedule.

RECenters operate in the Park Revenue Fund so overall fees must be set at levels that help to recover not only operational and some capital costs, but also areas where, as a matter of policy, the Park Authority Board and Board of Supervisors have chosen to subsidize use. For example, we are currently subsidizing senior use of RECenters by \$1.57 million annually and class scholarships for low income citizens by \$166,369 annually.