

Build it and They Will Come – the Do’s and Don’ts of Gaining Support for Building a Public Facility in Your Community

An Interview with Ronald L. Goss, President, RPM Management Company in Little Rock and a community leader involved in developing the Lonoke Community Center

What was your project and where did the idea come from?

I was involved in developing a community center in Lonoke. We just celebrated our 10th anniversary - we opened it on June, 2002. How did it start? There were two of us – another gentleman who had small children came to me and said we need a community center. We brought in citizens from the churches – black and white, and we asked – is there a need, and how would we do this.

How did you involve the organizations and citizens in your community?

It started 3 years prior to that [the opening], that we as a group started the process. A group said a community center would help the community. We formed a committee of citizens, and we visited community centers around the state at our own expense. They came back and gave reports. We decided what we wanted in a community center. We called favors, and asked architects and engineers we knew to draw rough drawings.

How were community leaders involved in this process?

The city came to us and said they have \$50,000 grant to get a community center, and they felt our initiative would interfere with theirs. So we agreed to back down. The city never did anything, and lost the \$50k. After a year’s delay, we got drawings, went to the city, and said – we are prepared to have a special election for one half cent – half goes for construction and half to operations. We asked the city to go for a special election. They said no, so we said we would pay for it. Then they agreed to do it.

After it was set, we went to churches and organizations - whenever 2 or 3 people were there, we were there. We got voter rolls from the election commission and sent out fliers at our expense, to vote for the community center tax. I went to the chamber of commerce and asked for their support. They refused, and said they don’t get involved in political issues. Neither the city nor the chamber of commerce endorsed it. But we went forward anyway.

What was the result, and how did you move toward implementation?

We had volunteers on the streets and picking people up on election day. It was the largest turnout for a special election they ever had, and over 70 percent voted for it.

We formed committees to select an architect, contractor, and etc. We finally selected an architect, engineer, and general contractor. Our first year budget – we thought if we had 1000 members, we would be ecstatic. We were overwhelmed by the number of members – even from England. Membership – we ran up to 3,000 people. Now we average 1,500, in a town of 4,000. Those are active members. We also have members who come once a year. Single adult - \$15/month, family - \$16.50/month. It is very inexpensive. We felt that we had to have some charge.

Shortly after that, we built an additional 3,000 square feet. We bought 12-15 acres, so we had the space. There is an open room for aerobics, a full size basketball court, a weight room, a large pool. We have a lot of programs and soccer fields.

This bond issue was written up so that the city can't touch the money of the community center. We have a building fund of \$30k, and over \$200k in reserve funds. The community center cost \$4.2 million, and the addition cost \$320,000.

The community center has been successful, and it was a grassroots effort. The community got involved, and the city and chamber of commerce did not see the need.

We have always been very cooperative with the city. The city owns the facility. Everything we do as a board, we have to have city approval. It is the Lonoke Community Center. The city approves our budget. Any capital expenses, the city has to approve.

How we named our director – we sent out a state-wide request for resumes who could manage the community center. A lot of people applied. We formed a separate committee to deal with that, and interviewed candidates. The committee narrowed it down to 2 people – a local person, and a person who had worked in another community center in another city. The second person – accepted the position, then turned it down, so we hired the local person.

If someone from another community told you they wanted to build a similar project in their community, what advice would you give them?

Keys to success – go the influential people in your community, and explain to them why the city needs it. We explained it would improve the quality of life and bring in more people. If those people are on board – church leaders, black leaders, and other leaders, it gains momentum.

Give people small jobs to do, and when they get their jobs accomplished, they feel like they have accomplished something.

It takes a lot of people to make it happen. I can't take credit; I was just one of the people involved. It was enlightening for me to see that many people in the community get involved.

The key is to develop your support base, and to convince them that what you are doing is for the betterment of the community.

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