

community

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MAGAZINE

THE SOCCER EFFECT

HOW THE USL KICKS OFF
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN
SMALL AND MIDSIZE CITIES



 **COMMUNITY
OF THE YEAR**
P18

 **Playmaker Spotlight**
There's No Place Like Tacoma | P.06

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Playmakers,

Welcome to 2024! As street sweepers brush away the debris of New Year's Eve celebrations, we can now fully embrace the hopeful energy that comes with the calendar's transition. However, civic leaders across the country know that while it feels good to dream, making a real impact on your community requires thoughtful and focused effort. And it doesn't just start on January 1st.

This issue of Community Playmaker is part celebration, part preparation. We highlight our first annual Community of the Year – a true example of what can happen when leaders cast an inclusive vision for their community and settle for nothing less than making it a reality. We take you to downtown Colorado Springs, an example of how the United Soccer League drives big-time economic development in America's small and mid-sized cities. We talked to experts throughout the country to discuss the trends and tools (see our AI article) that will impact communities in the coming years.

And we sat down with the National League of Cities President and Mayor of Tacoma, Washington Victoria Woodards, to discuss how this organization is amplifying the impact of city government and standing up for city leaders on the national stage.

We hope these articles provide you with the tools and insights necessary to make 2024 the launch pad for initiatives that allow your communities to flourish. ☰

Peace, Love, and Public Service,

Johnny Crosskey

Managing Editor, Community Playmaker Magazine

Issue 03: Winter 2024

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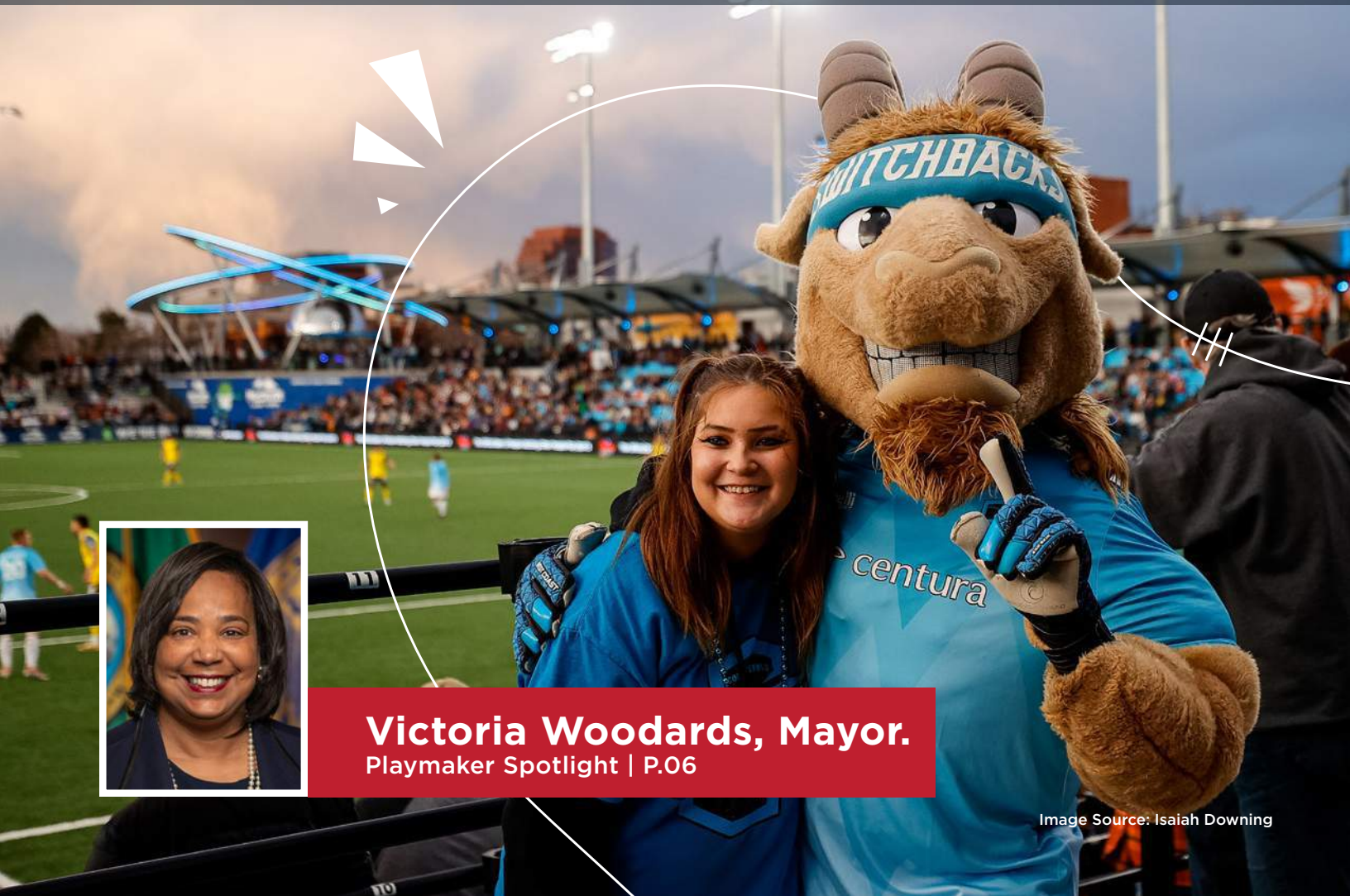
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Victoria Woodards, Mayor.
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LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES

ADVICE FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY



What's the biggest challenge that local governments face?

Managing growth and maintaining proper infrastructure, sewer, and wastewater are huge challenges because everybody wants them, but nobody wants to pay for it.

So it's understanding the need to manage your city's growth. Helping people understand that, 'yes, they're building this subdivision. No, we're not expanding the road.' And why, and the issues that come with that. So I would say for our local government, one of the biggest ones is just to manage growth.



Dorothea Taylor Bogert

Mayor
Auburndale, Florida
(pop. 21,189)



Bobby Gutierrez

Mayor
Bryan, Texas
(pop. 86,866)

How has the rise of social media impacted your communication strategy?

Social media plays a big part because some people tag you the second something happens. It's hard to respond to everything on social media and some of it, is from people who want to bait you. Or debate you. You have to consider what you say because words matter. You have to be very careful when you speak.

I've been in business all my life and I'm used to being a quick thinker and a quick speaker and in the political life, it's a little different. You can't just react. You have to think through the issue because words matter.





Why I choose city government?

My father was a state representative. I thought about running when I was 28. He was like, don't run for a local government. 'That's the dumbest thing ever.' He said you don't want to govern where you live. 'It's too messy.'

I think, 'How do you make the place you live better if you aren't willing to do it?' It can be very messy, but it can also be very rewarding. I think, at the end of the day, if you have a passion, if you want to make your community better, there's no better thing to do than public service.



Grover Robinson IV ≡

Former Mayor
Pensacola, Florida
(pop. 53,678)



Emily Styron ≡

Mayor
Zionsville, Indiana
(pop. 31,702)

What's something you wish your residents knew about working in government?

I wish that residents, in general, understood that decisions are made with teams of people. There's not an "individual" who made the decision that they were going to widen a road and disrupt part of your driveway or yard. The truth for Zionsville is that of the people who work in Zionsville (city government), almost all of them live in Zionsville and a handful of them were born in Zionsville. It's a town hall filled with people who love the town and want to do the best they can for residents and visitors.



Brandon Capetillo ≡

Mayor
Baytown, Texas
(pop. 84,324)

What advice would you give to someone young starting out in municipal leadership?

The advice I would give a young professional is always go to (and get to know) the people that really make things happen. It's going to be your experienced staff. Lean on them. Certainly, as elected officials, we have visions, but we rely on them. They're the vehicle.







there's no place like
tacoma

**...AND THERE'S NO ONE QUITE
LIKE THEIR MAYOR**

**HOW MAYOR VICTORIA WOODARDS IS TACKLING THE TOUGH ISSUES
TO KEEP TACOMA ON AMERICA'S TOP PLACES TO LIVE**

By **Ashley Whittaker** ☰

Mountain, city, or sea, you can get all three in Tacoma, Washington. This city ranks third in the United States as one of the best places to live, according to a study from bankrate.com. The study rated cities based on several criteria including the local job market, well-being of citizens, affordability, and diversity. That's a legacy that longtime resident and current Mayor, Victoria Woodards, plans to keep throughout her time in office – and for future generations.

Mayor Woodards has had a distinguished career marked by a deep commitment to public service and community advocacy. She began her political journey as a member of the Metro Parks Tacoma board and went on to become an at-large city council member for seven years. In 2017, she became the second African American woman to be elected Mayor of Tacoma. Throughout her tenure, Mayor Woodards has prioritized issues such as affordable housing, economic development, and public safety, working tirelessly to improve the quality of life for

Tacoma's residents. Her leadership has been characterized by a strong dedication to fostering inclusivity, diversity, and equity in her city, making her a respected figure in both local, regional, and national politics.

HOME-GROWN TALENT

Mayor Woodards was raised in Tacoma, and when you speak with her, it's easy to see how much she loves her city. As mayor of her hometown, Woodards has a unique view of the city – both liter-

ally and figuratively – from her office window on the 12th floor of the Tacoma Municipal Building. While she may not have set her sights on a career in politics, her love of community and heart for service put her there, as well as her longtime mentor and father figure, the late Harold Moss.

“I was working for the founding president and CEO of the (Tacoma) Urban League and in that job, I had the opportunity to meet prominent African American figures in our community. One of those people was Harold Moss,” said Woodards. “He was Tacoma’s first African American council member, Mayor, and county council member – but he was more than that, you know. We always call Harold Tacoma’s John Lewis or Tacoma’s Martin Luther King.”

As she tells it, Moss saw something in young Victoria and recruited her for a position as his assistant. While she hated to leave her role at the Tacoma Urban League, where she worked closely and built relationships with many of the people she supported in her community, after some prayer and personal consideration, Moss made her an offer she

couldn’t refuse, and her political career began.

“I found out very quickly that it is a great job to be the assistant to a politician because when you pick up the phone and call somebody – it gets answered. If I call and say I’m with Harold Moss’s office, they jump just as high for me as if Harold called himself. At that point, I thought my job in life would be to work next to power and take care of powerful people in the community. But then, Harold got to the end of his term and started talking about me running for office,” said Woodards. “And I thought, yeah – no.”

While that may not have been the right fit, it didn’t take long for the right opportunity to present itself. A park commissioner seat was vacant, and the board was looking for a person of color, preferably a woman, to fill it. For Victoria – it was kismet.

“I went for the appointment, got the appointment, and haven’t looked back since,” said Woodards.

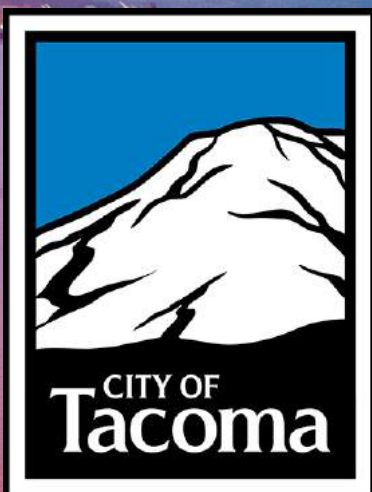
Woodards recounts several impactful lessons from her early mentorship with Moss, including how to value and respect

people in all positions – not just the CEOs – and the importance of authentically living your values daily, not just saying them. Her passion for service to others as well as Moss’s early guidance and influence on her leadership are evident.

“Now look, here I am, mayor of my hometown, a city where he was the first African American mayor. I’m just honored to be able to carry on that legacy. I am the second biracial African American woman to serve as mayor. When I am done, we will have had 16 years of leadership in this community by African American women. And I don’t think that just speaks to the quality of me as a leader, but it speaks to the community that I am blessed to govern.”

TACKLING THE TOUGH STUFF

One of the biggest issues facing Mayor Woodards – as well as the entire nation – is the issue of affordable housing. The “Home in Tacoma” plan is a comprehensive initiative to address the housing crisis in Tacoma, Washington. The plan focuses on increasing affordable housing



options, preventing homelessness, and improving housing stability for residents. It includes measures such as investing in affordable housing development, expanding tenant protections, and partnering with organizations to provide supportive services for vulnerable populations. The benefits to the community are significant, as this plan aims to reduce the homeless population, improve living conditions for low-income families, and create more inclusive and equitable neighborhoods. By prioritizing affordable housing, Mayor Woodards seeks to enhance Tacoma's overall quality of life, fostering a more vibrant and economically resilient city for all its residents.

Now in phase two, Woodards is leading the implementation amid public fear and uncertainty. Residents fear that changing zoning laws from single-family to multi-family units in downtown areas will potentially impact neighborhood character, increase population density, and cause parking shortages and traffic congestion. They worry that it might alter the look and feel of their neighborhoods, disrupt established communities, and potentially reduce property values. Some have apprehensions about the

potential for noise, reduced privacy, and a perceived strain on local infrastructure and services as the population density increases. These concerns reflect a broader debate about balancing the need for affordable housing and urban development with the desire to preserve the existing character and quality of life in residential neighborhoods.

“A lot of our residents are very scared when we talk about doing away with single-family housing because they think that means we're going to put in a six-story apartment building with 200 units right next door, but that doesn't make sense,” said Woodards. “However, in a business district with a grocery on the corner and access to public transit, post office, and amenities like a bank – it makes perfect sense.”

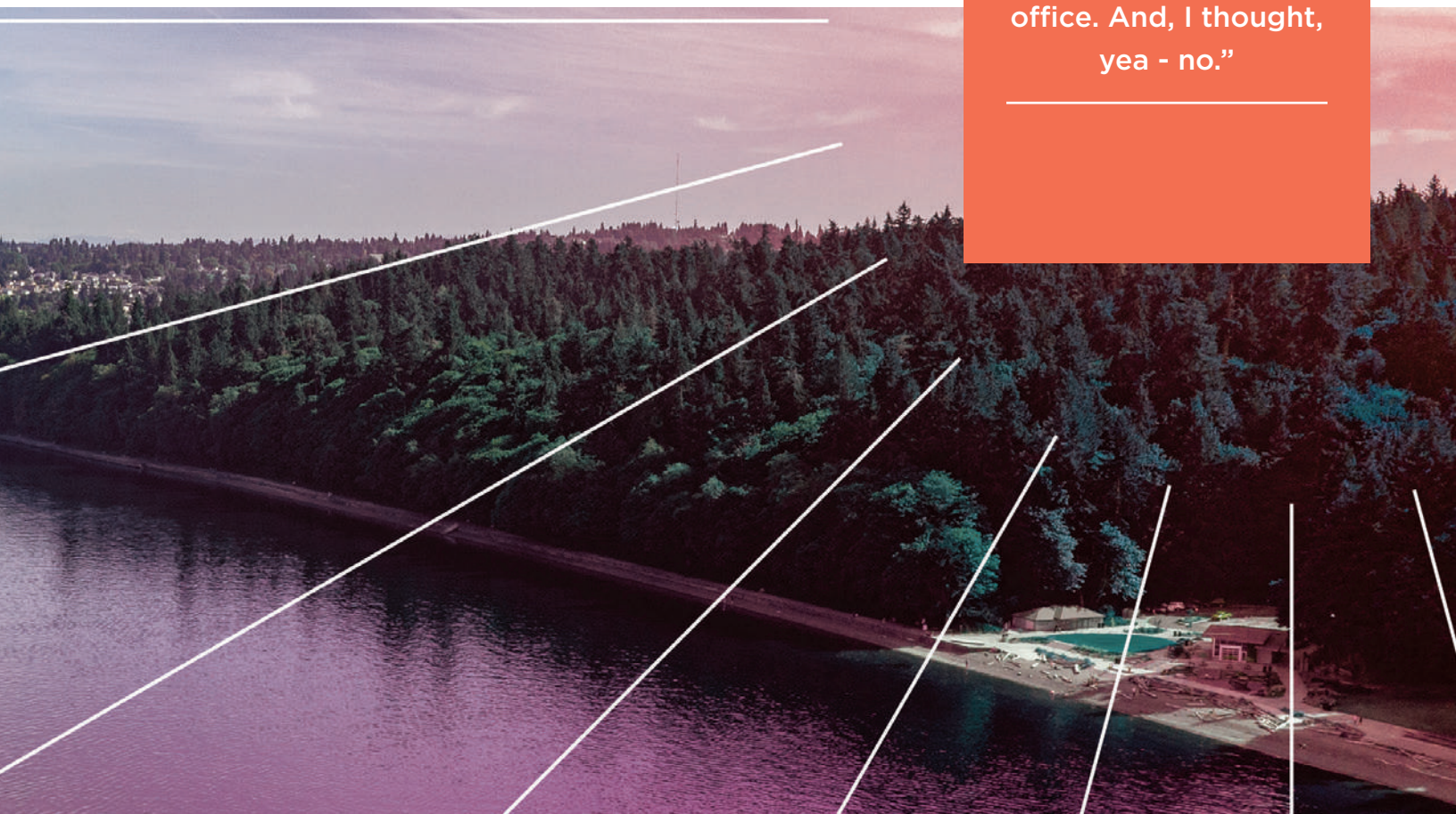
Woodards, who recently completed a year-long term as president of the National League of Cities (NLC), went on to discuss how she led the conversation about solving affordable housing at the national level.

“The greatest outcome of our work was not another report. If a report would

solve it, we would have already fixed it. But what we did do was sit down with national and local organizations in our cities who don't normally sit across the table from one another. We talked to developers, realtors, people who finance, and rental housing associations. Those are the people often seen as opponents on the ground when, in fact, we all want the same thing... We had some pretty heated conversations about what needed to be fixed. Cities cannot build all the affordable housing we need, so we need developers and rental housing associations, realtors, and financiers – we need partners in this work.”



“Harold [Moss] got to the end of his term and started talking to me about running for office. And, I thought, yea - no.”





“If you really want to lift a community up, you focus on those who need lifting up the most. If we lift people out of poverty, that also helps the middle and upper classes - that helps everybody.”



KEEPING TACOMA ON TOP

Tacoma is considered one of the top places to live in the United States due to its exceptional natural beauty with views of Mount Rainier and proximity to Puget Sound, a vibrant cultural scene, a growing economy with diverse job opportunities, quality educational institutions, strong community engagement, and relatively affordable living costs compared to larger cities. The city's accessibility, diverse neighborhoods, and commitment to fostering creativity and culture make it an attractive destination for individuals and families seeking a high quality of life in the Pacific Northwest.

"You know, I wish I could say it's easy (to stay on the top of that list), but we understand as a community and all our partners – whether that's parks and schools or businesses – understand the uniqueness and special things that make Tacoma great. It's an all-hands-on-deck approach to help Tacoma remain in the top five cities. We must focus and be innovative in the things we do."

Innovation and partnership are keys to keeping up the quality of life in an emerging city. According to *The Urbanist*, by 2040, Tacoma's population is expected to grow by over 127,000 new residents; that's a 58% increase.

Leveraging its strategic location within the Puget Sound region, Tacoma is poised to attract increased investment and innovation, particularly in the technology, healthcare, and manufacturing sectors. The city aims to foster a diverse and inclusive economy by supporting small businesses, workforce development programs, and affordable housing initiatives. Sustainable practices and environmental stewardship are integral to this strategy, focusing on clean energy, transit-oriented development, and green infrastructure.

"As we're engaging businesses to move here, we're also ensuring we're able to give them the kind of workforce they need,

and at the same time, we're ensuring the people who live here find a job they're passionate about and want to do every day," said Woodards. "We want to get people skilled or even up-skilled to take these jobs. We are really focused on what we're calling an earn-and-learn model."

This earn-and-learn model has already been successfully piloted in Tacoma as a healthcare pathway program. These programs provide guidance, coursework, and hands-on experience to prepare students for roles in healthcare, such as nursing, medical assisting, or healthcare administration. Tacoma's approach to these pathway programs is structured yet flexible and realistic. There are ways for participants to pause and then later re-engage the program if life throws them a curveball.

"I think at the root of affordable housing is a good paying job – and the root of that is getting a good education. And, when I say education, I don't just mean a four-year degree; I mean tech school, military experience, or on-the-job training," said Woodards. "People want to take care of themselves, and we have to provide them pathways to be able to – and that starts with a good paying job."

Of course, a quality education starts before college or technical school. Over the last decade, according to Mayor Woodards, the community has worked together to bring graduation rates at some of Tacoma's high schools from an estimated 55 percent to over a 90 percent gradua-

tion rate in 2023. It's statistics like this – and Tacoma's nationally-recognized parks system (NRPA's gold standard), the city's natural beauty, including Mount Rainier and Puget Sound, and a bustling art and culture scene (hello, Chihuly!) that keep it rated highly among national rankings.

CALLED TO SERVE HER COMMUNITY

From early years serving in the army to starting her career in the Tacoma



Urban League and then moving into local government through Metro Parks Tacoma, the Tacoma City Council, serving as the mayor, and residing as president of the National League of Cities, Mayor Victoria Woodards' career has been defined by public service. Whether you're watching her give a state-of-affairs speech at the NLC City Summit or spending an hour with her on Zoom, her heart is discernable. For her, it's not a job; it's a calling.

"At every turn, at every office that I've run for, there has been something that was revealed to me that said you're supposed to do this. I haven't done any of this for myself, but really, I've been called to serve my community." ☰

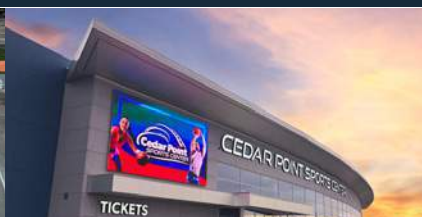
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TACKLING THE AMERICAN HOUSING CRISIS: HOW U.S. CITIES ARE USING INITIATIVES AND ACTION TO FIND A HOME FOR RESIDENTS

By Natalie Hamren ≡



Image Source: AdobeStock

In most cities throughout the U.S., affordable housing is an urgent and growing need. According to “The State of the Nation’s Housing 2023” report by the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, 19 million homeowners in 2021 were cost-burdened, defined as spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing. When adding renters to the mix, that number jumped to 40.6 million people or more than one in every three Americans.

These numbers point to an American crisis, one that’s not exclusive to urban, rural, or suburban environments. Because of the far-reaching nature of this crisis and its downstream effects on employment, quality of life, and even childcare options,

cities are ramping up their efforts to ensure affordable housing for their residents. Their solutions aim to strike at the heart of several root causes of the housing crisis to right past wrongs.

Understanding the importance of these solutions and the aspects of the housing issue cities tackle requires a look back at some of the reasons why affordable housing became such an issue in the first place.

The American Housing Crisis: How Did We Get Here?

As one would expect, the American housing crisis is rooted in an intricate

mesh of actions, attitudes, and outcomes that have brought us to our current circumstances. According to Carl Gershenson, director of Princeton University’s Eviction Lab, which gathers data on eviction rates in cities throughout the country, several factors can be pointed to when examining how we got to this point. Gershenson first points to what he calls “simple arithmetic” as a primary issue. “If you go back to the year 2000, the median renter household income has increased by around three percent, while the median rent has increased by 18 percent.”

While this stat is important, it’s only the start of diagnosing the problem. “As a country, we were in a situation where

there were low-rent markets that could serve as safety valves for coastal cities,” said Gershenson.

He went on to say, “over the years, people who had lived in established places like New York City or San Francisco saw more of their income going towards rent every year, and it was getting harder and harder for them (to afford to live in these areas). Many people were displaced, having to move further into the suburbs or move to different places altogether. But at least there was a place for them to go because we had Phoenix, we had Houston, we had North Carolina.”



“If you go back to the year 2000, the median renter household income has increased by around three percent, while the median rent has increased by 18 percent.”

Matthew Roland, Assistant Dean, Clinical Assistant Professor, and Master of the Real Estate Development Program at the University of Buffalo agrees that wages have not increased to accommodate increased rental prices. Another factor that contributes to the housing crisis is inflation.

“Part of the growth in rent is factored by increased inflation that’s caused by, you

know, everything globally. COVID-19 didn’t help at all. Construction costs are up; interest rates are up,” Roland says. “So it costs more to do a new project.”

Gershenson went on to say that cities that were once deemed “affordable” alternatives to larger cities saw dramatic rent increases during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, neutralizing their ability to be viable living options for people. Further, Gershenson notes that many of these communities had moderate eviction rates before COVID-19 but did not have extensive tenant protections. Without those protections in place and in the face of increasing rents in both small and large communities, many people were left with few options.

Gershenson also notes that along with increasing rents in formerly “low-rent” cities and a lack of tenant protections, zoning laws that discouraged or prohibited multi-family structures in communities led to a lack of affordable housing compared to the demand, specifically housing located close to employment-rich areas or areas close to public transit in cities.

With these factors at the core of the affordable housing crisis, cities are developing groundbreaking initiatives and dramatically shifting policies to stem the tide.

Addressing Zoning To Make Affordable Housing Possible in Wyoming

While many see affordable housing as a “big city” problem, rural communities also struggle with housing availability and affordability. Laramie, Wyoming, has a population of just over 31,000. The city is home to the University of Wyoming – the only four-year university in the state – which makes the town younger than

many of its counterparts (median age is 26.1, according to the 2020 U.S. Census.)

“We have an incredibly young population and a highly educated population,” says Brian Harrington, Laramie’s mayor. “In my mind, the number one thing holding back our community from growth and, sort of, stability, is housing.”

Harrington says prospective employers looking to expand or move their company to Laramie would think the community is great but needs more housing. The city is roughly 1,500 units short.



“At the base level, what we need is more units. The actions of the [City Council] have largely centered around how can we get more units quickly,” Harrington says.

The Laramie City Council took an “aggressive” approach to the housing crisis by reducing zoning requirements and shrinking lot sizes. Harrington says there is no single zone in Laramie anymore that can’t have some variety of multi-family development.

Despite easing zoning regulations, Laramie, like many other cities, has been dealing with investors and companies buying up family homes, which strains the local housing market and reduces the inventory.

“We are seeing cash offers from mysterious LLCs happening, buying up every single-family home they can get,” said Harrington, “we’re just seeing stuff turned into short-term or long-term traditional rentals and that, obviously, is not good for your housing market or for neighborhood community building. It really brings challenges.”

Seeking State Funding Options in Michigan

Gershenson expressed that while changing zoning laws is important, they would primarily serve middle-class families with the means to live in affordable housing. For low-income citizens, a financial investment by communities is needed, according to Gershenson.

In 2020, Grand Rapids, Michigan, had a housing needs assessment completed. “It was updated in 2022. The assessment showed the current demand for new rental housing by 2027 is shy of 8,000 units,” says Jono Klooster, Grand Rapids’

interim economic development director.

In 2020, the original estimate was just over 5,000 units. “On the homeownership side, the need is over 6,000 new units by 2027. Two years before that, the identified need was about 3,500,” says Klooster.

In early October, the city of Grand Rapids received \$6.1 million from the state under the “Revitalization and Placemaking 2.0 Program.” According to Klooster, the grant will support five projects throughout the city—three of which are rehabilitating vacant buildings, and the other two are new construction projects.



Image Source: AdobeStock

“The grant program is competitive,” Klooster says. The city of Grand Rapids has successfully submitted the grant as an intermediary between the state and project developers.

“We put out our own, sort of, pre-application or call for proposals, so to speak, to get project submissions, and then we take those projects and make sure that they will be competitive under the state’s requirements,” Klooster says. “But beyond that, we have focused our application, for both of these grants, on new housing production with a priority for affordable housing.”

Klooster says Grand Rapids defines households requiring affordable housing as those earning no more than 80 percent of the city’s median income, which was \$55,385 in 2021, according to U.S. Census data. The grant will also allow the city to support 27 new homeownership opportunities using the community land trust model.

According to Klooster, the lack of affordable housing has been a top concern for the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce. Housing scarcity can affect employers and businesses by reducing the number of employees able to live in the city.

“In this environment, where everybody is struggling to attract talent, the inability to provide the opportunities for people who want to live here to actually come and live here impacts employers. If we can snap our fingers and have those housing units that we need, I think a lot of companies would struggle a lot less with finding the employees and the talent they need,” Klooster says.

Cities Turn To Office Vacancies for Answers to the Housing Crisis

Another issue facing cities, especially those with large downtown areas, is the growing number of office vacancies driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and emerging interest in remote work. According to data from JLL Research, North America’s office space vacancy rate



stood at 21 percent. While the economic impact of high vacancy rates is dramatic, it does present an opportunity which many cities are capitalizing on.

In Boston, Massachusetts, which has a nearly 20 percent office vacancy rate, a pilot program has been established to convert some of these buildings into affordable apartments. The Downtown Office to Residential Conversion Pilot Program incentivizes developers and owners willing to convert their buildings from office to residential use. Through the program, developers will enter a “payment in lieu of taxes” agreement with the City of Boston and the Boston

Planning & Development Agency (BPDA). The agreement will provide an average tax abatement of up to 75 percent of the fair market-assessed residential value for up to 29 years. Permitting may also be fast-tracked through this program. To ensure that this program impacts the need for affordable housing, the BPDA passed a new inclusionary development policy requiring that 20 percent of each development be deemed affordable (17 percent designated for people living at 60 percent of Boston’s median income level and three percent for people using Section 8 vouchers.)

While these conversions make sense logically, take property that businesses have a lesser interest in and apply them to a greater need, the process can be challenging. Offices are structured differently from residential housing, and the conversions can be considered cost-prohibited for some developers. This has been particularly challenging in Washington, D.C., where a similar program has seen two of 12 planned office-to-residential conversions come to fruition. Recently, Washington, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser proposed increasing the budget for their program from \$6.8 million to 41 million by 2028. The program will include 20-year tax abatements for participating developers.

Using Federal Tax Credits To Build Affordable Housing

Although cities can legislate to make housing more affordable in their local communities, various programs nationwide help fund affordable housing says Roland. There are three “main” solutions for affordable housing, one being public housing that is typically built or operated by a local housing authority.

“We also have Section 8, which is a voucher

system. A landlord is not obligated to provide vouchers; they have to opt into the program,” Roland says, “The voucher covers the difference between their rent in the apartment building and what a resident can pay as a percent of their income.”

The third option is the Low Income Housing Tax Credit Program, a national program distributed throughout states. It awards developers tax credits for building a certain percentage of low-income housing. However, this solution is more complicated, Roland says, because these projects have different funding sources coming. Just in New York state, where Roland works, a project typically takes two rounds—or years of applications—to be eligible and awarded.

No Catch-All Solutions

Whether adjusting zoning laws to encourage multi-family home development, seeking state and federal funding, or converting office buildings, city leaders are working hard to solve the burgeoning housing crisis. While housing shortages deeply impact quality of life, they can also take their toll on placemaking and the local economy. And while there isn't a catch-all solution, there are pockets of success. In Washington, one of the two office-to-residential conversion buildings will contain 383 residential units. Other planned conversions in the nation's capital will provide up to 1,000 units. Small numbers, perhaps, but it's everything to the families and individuals looking for a place to call home. ☰



The Laramie City Council took an “aggressive” approach to the housing crisis by reducing zoning requirements and shrinking lot sizes. Harrington says there is no single zone in Laramie anymore that can't have some variety of multi-family development.





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**community
of the year**

2023

By Suzanne Wentley 

Marion, Iowa

Before the COVID-19 lockdown forced Lexi Matthews and her fiancé to reevaluate their life in Chicago, the last thing she would have expected was to move home to Marion, Iowa.

“When I was growing up, you didn’t do anything in Marion,” she said. “But it’s a lot more exciting than I thought. Now, everything you want is right here in Marion.”

Marion didn’t become a great town by accident. The elected officials, business owners, civic leaders, and everyday residents came together to create exactly the kind of small town that would attract folks like Ms. Matthews.





Image Source: City of Marion

She and her fiancé now own Uptown Coffee Company. This elegant and smart shop gets the town caffeinated before heading out for a walk on one of the 35 miles of hiking trails, an afternoon of free classes at the newly opened library, a game of pickleball at the new \$19.5 million YMCA community center, or one of the scores of free, family-friendly events in revitalized and newly constructed gathering spaces scattered around town.

Allow us to introduce you to, Marion, Iowa, Community Playmaker's 2023 Community of the Year.

In determining the places worthy of this honor, we look for communities that cast an important vision for their future, invest in the quality of life through policies and initiatives, serve as the embodiment of public service, and, most importantly, are loved by residents.

Communities from around the country submitted entries for this contest. Our panel reviewed each entry with several criteria in mind, including the scope of the quality-of-life projects that were launched and the impact each project



☰
“We started prioritizing quality of life, and we were more intentional about seeing ourselves as a customer service organization for the people.”

had, among other items. While we received many tremendous and inspiring entries, one stood above the rest.

“We just saw a great potential to engage the community and be more proactive about giving them greater opportunities,” said Marion’s Mayor Nick AbouAssaly. “We started prioritizing quality of life, and we were more intentional about seeing ourselves as a customer service organization for the people. We were there to help people solve issues and serve them.”

Mayor AbouAssaly, who moved to Marion when he was a boy, always knew that the town of 43,000 residents couldn’t rely on great weather or natural features like mountains or beaches. Instead, they had to create special places — be it building a new amphitheater, constructing walkable plazas throughout downtown, or even turning a dumpster-filled alley into a hip, art-filled gathering space.

The keys to success, residents agree, are collaboration, clear communication, and government transparency that results in a sense of belonging for everyone in the community. So even when a derecho, or a storm with sustained winds of 140 mph, hit the town in 2020, Marion residents were poised to support each other and rebuild even stronger.



Imagining Something Greater

The Marion of today started to develop back in 2007 when Jill Ackerman stepped in as president of the Chamber of Commerce. In search of funding for community development projects, she stumbled upon the Iowa Great Places program and Dubuque, Iowa. City officials there encouraged her to organize brainstorming sessions about the future of Marion.

More than 5,000 people from the town chimed in with ideas for making their town better.

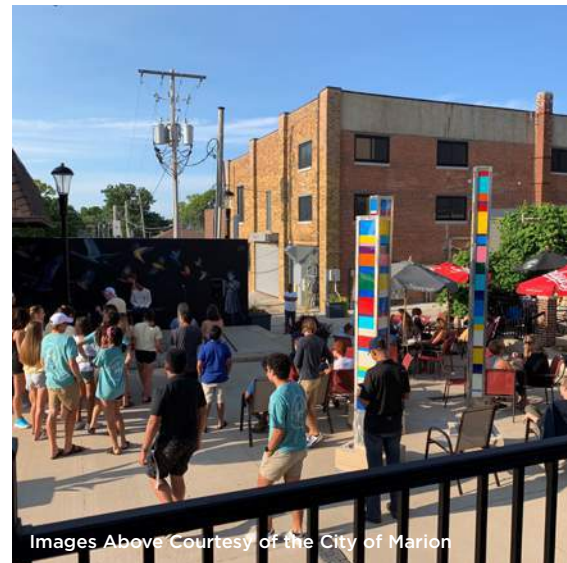
“We didn’t know what we were doing, but we realized we worked really well together,” Ackerman said. “Our city staff and city council really do listen to what the residents want, and that’s how our projects were successful. People were at the table from the beginning, and their taxpayer dollars are used for projects they really want.”

The motivation was high. After all, the old railroad town was little more than a bedroom community for Cedar Rapids. That was the experience of Ann Brendes, a teacher who grew up in Cedar Rapids and moved to Marion in 2007 to enroll



her children in the excellent school district.

“I had no intention to still be here now that my kids graduated high school,” she said. “I would have never suggested that someone come here in 2007, but in 2023, it’s fantastic. COVID-19 and the derecho could have devastated our community, but we snapped back so fast. I’m super proud to live here. It was the best decision to move here.”



Images Above Courtesy of the City of Marion



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One of Mayor AbouAssaly's favorite projects is the Uptown Artway. In an unused, dumpster-filled back alleyway, the city put the utilities underground, added nine sculptures from artists throughout the country, built a stage, and offered a schedule of free events.

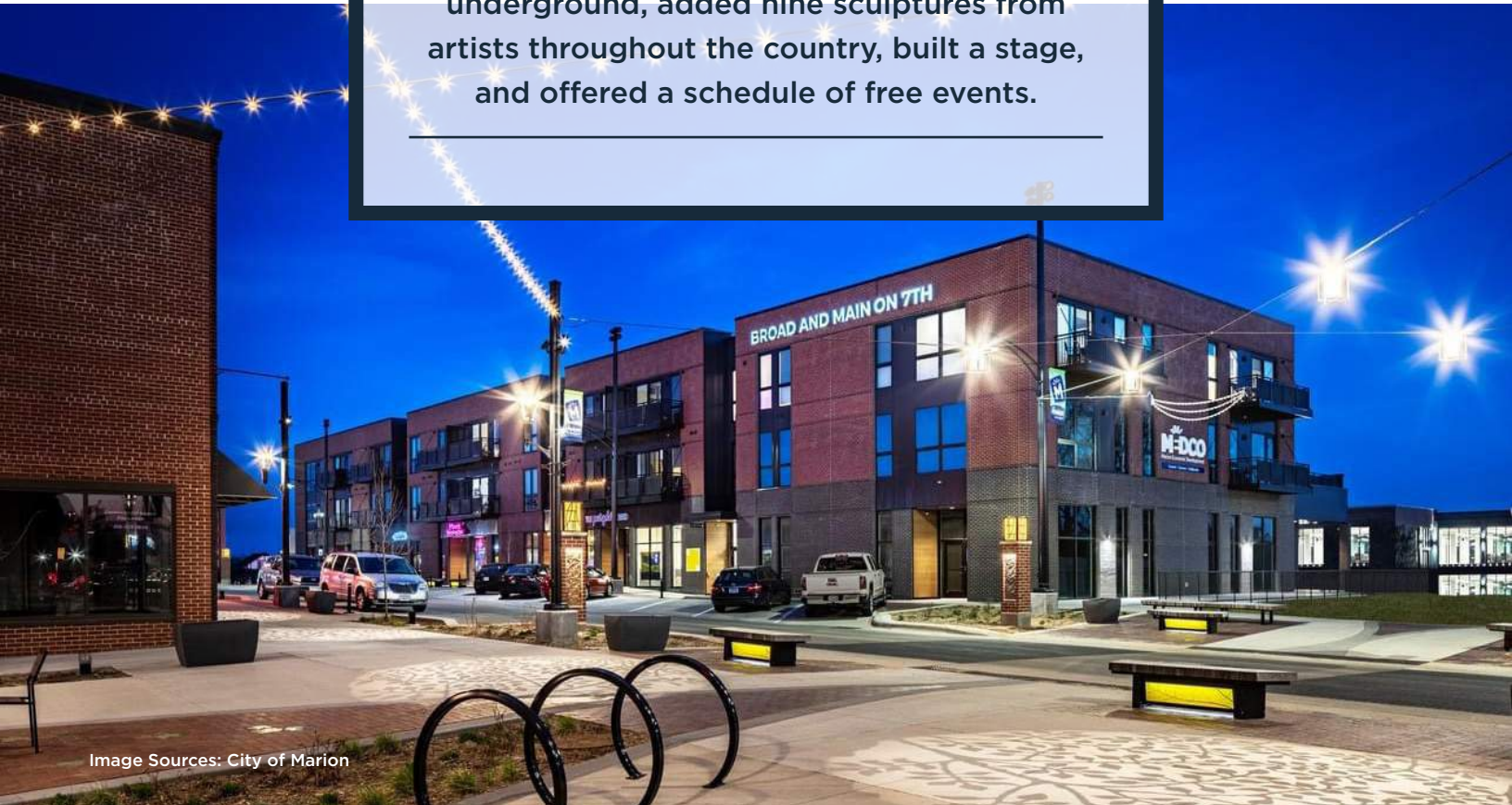


Image Sources: City of Marion

Creating Community Gathering Spaces

Part of the reason why Marion grew so quickly was because they had a list of shovel-ready projects that brought in available grant money. The community also donated both time and money through capital campaigns that raised the rest of the funding. This brought seemingly big ideas into reality.

One of Mayor AbouAssaly's favorite projects is the Uptown Artway. In an unused, dumpster-filled back alleyway, the city put the utilities underground, added nine sculptures from artists throughout the country, built a stage, and offered a schedule of free events. Suddenly, restaurants were adding outside seating and people were strolling along new streetscaping on Seventh Avenue to new plazas throughout downtown.

Marion residents also pack into the new 75,000-square-foot YMCA, where the nonprofit and the city's recreation department run joint after-school programs and community health initiatives for all ages. There were 16,000 new members last year, the mayor reported.

Then there is the state-of-the-art library, which functions more as a catch-all community center. Along with books, there's a recording studio, teen area, art studio, demonstration kitchen, quilting machine, and 3D printer.

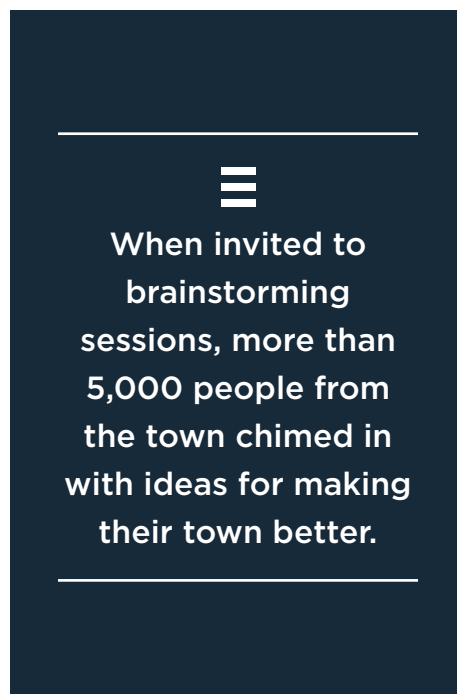
On warmer days, Ms. Brendes will see people walking their dogs on the trails that meander along Indian Creek in her backyard. She's on the committee to create more beautiful spaces along the creek. She also volunteers for the Prospect Meadows Miracle League, which offers baseball programs for kids with special needs in Marion's newly renovated park.

"It shows how inclusive our community

is. We are making an effort for everyone," she said. "We want to make sure everyone feels like they belong in Marion."

Reaching Higher to Marion's Future

That effort paid off, with all of the projects from the first charette complete. The town is now working on a punch list that came from the second workshop held in 2017, and residents are always coming up with new ideas. Elected officials and city staff are poised to listen at the library every Saturday, the farmer's market during the summer, and other community events throughout the year.



☰

**When invited to
brainstorming
sessions, more than
5,000 people from
the town chimed in
with ideas for making
their town better.**

"When there is a lot of change in a city, we see it as essential for the city to communicate what we're doing and why we're doing it," Mayor AbouAssaly said. "We have a weekly email to the residents who signed up and a quarterly magazine that goes to every home in the city. There is always resistance, but we see great value in collaborating."

As the spring thaws, the town is ready to break ground on a project called "The Heart of It All" in the center of downtown. It will feature the first refrigerated ice loop in the state and an enclosed pavilion to meet and warm up. In the summer, they'll have a water feature for family playtime and public art installations with fire tables for evening drinks.

Plus, residents still have a place in their hearts for their history. The old railroad caboose that sat rusting away downtown was carefully moved and renovated within a new historical park, which will be completed within the next couple of years.

Ms. Matthews, whose coffee shop turns into a bar run by her parents in the evenings, said she values the balance of honoring the past while looking toward Marion's future. She's using her background in the music industry to oversee next year's Marion Arts Festival, which draws more than 10,000 people in the summer.

"It's a great community with so much going on in terms of growth," she said. "Marion is a small enough community that you get the focus of the city's chamber and council people. I feel very fortunate." ☰

COY
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of the year**
2023

EMBRACING THE FUTURE OF INFRASTRUCTURE

P3 PROJECTS AND EVOLVING FUNDING MECHANISMS

By Mary Scott Nabers, CEO of Strategic Partnerships Inc. ≡



Infrastructure is the backbone of our society, encompassing a wide range of vital industry components, public facilities, networks, security measures, and all other systems that support the quality of life of our residents.

However, too much of America's infrastructure is outdated, inefficient, and ill-equipped to meet modern demands. Public funding is often inadequate to address even the most critical problems. Still, our daily dependence on clean drinking water, safe bridges, modernized schools, healthcare facilities, dependable power grids, port upgrades, and disaster relief remains unchanged, regardless of funding limitations.

That's why the U.S. Congress is increasingly endorsing, incentivizing, and sometimes mandating private sector investment when federal funding is

allocated for infrastructure projects. There is not enough public funding to cover the needs. Private sector investment is required.

How the Infrastructure of Tomorrow Is Being Funded

Communities can leverage various programs and funding mechanisms to address ongoing infrastructure challenges. Many local governments turn to municipal bonds to fund projects. The bonds are backed by municipal revenue and used to support public initiatives. Special tax districts can also be established to fund projects or services. When that is the case, the special districts impose additional taxes on residents within a defined area, generating revenue solely for the identified project. Grants provide funding for projects at all levels of government.

Apart from those funding options are public-private partnerships (P3). P3s are becoming a more viable option for communities because private-sector investment is attractive to local leaders. The funding mechanism is valued for the collaboration it fosters between public entities and private sector firms as much as for the funding they provide.

The P3 Knowledge Gap

According to the American Road & Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA), there were 29,000 active highway and bridge projects last year, reflecting a nine percent annual increase over the previous year. ARTBA anticipates that transportation construction work will reach \$172.3 billion in 2023, up from \$155.4 billion in 2022, and a large portion is expected to represent public-private partnership initiatives.

Despite this statistic, many public officials continue to exhibit reluctance when considering a P3 approach for funding major projects. This is due, in part, to the relative newness of the P3 delivery model and because a distinct procurement process with lengthier legal agreements may be required when private sector investors are involved.

Even with numerous conferences, training sessions, and webinars focused on P3 delivery models, this approach remains unfamiliar and can appear daunting, especially when alternative funding sources are involved. Unfortunately, the media's contribution to disseminating knowledge has been minimal, resulting in varying levels of P3 legislative adoption across states.

Consequently, some government leaders have chosen to forgo federal funding for critical projects rather than embrace a delivery model they have not tested. Therefore, it is timely to emphasize the significance of understanding the basics of a P3 delivery model for citizens and public executives.

Five Best Practices for P3 Execution

Here are some critical steps to ensure success in a P3 engagement. These tips are crucial for both public and private sector executives to remember:

1. Project selection. Not all large projects are suitable for a P3 engagement. It's essential to thoroughly assess a project's components and feasibility during the planning phase. Public officials with available funding may opt for an alternative delivery method if no funding or unique expertise is required. However, a P3 delivery model may be optimal for large and complex projects.
2. First-time P3 engagements may require advisors. This applies to three categories of execution: technical, legal, and/or financial services. The need for all three depends on a project's type and size and the experience level of public officials overseeing the project.
3. The governmental entity should appoint an internal project champion. Having a secondary champion is also valuable for contingency situations.



4. Civic outreach. Develop a civic outreach plan early in the planning phase for effective internal and external communication. Many projects hold a high profile and garnering community and stakeholder support will be critical. The quicker you can gain allies and, at least, establish a middle ground with opponents, the more the likely smooth execution will be achieved. Clear communication and transparency are vital.
5. An in-house team should be established to ensure success, collaborate with advisors and project leaders, and assist the private sector partner. The in-house team should be qualified, experienced, capable, and committed to the project's success.

Numerous regions have enjoyed the benefits of private sector investments in public projects, including the District of Columbia's street lighting initiative and a new Mississippi River bridge in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. New student housing projects, including one at the University of Massachusetts, improved public safety facilities, and affordable housing projects have also benefitted from collaboration through P3s.


Communities should remain flexible in the face of changing funding methods and proactively explore diverse financial avenues to meet critical project needs. The future of infrastructure development and public initiatives hinges on adaptable and innovative funding approaches. ■





THE SOCCER EFFECT

HOW THE USL KICKS OFF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SMALL AND MIDSIZE CITIES

By Michael LoRé 

Nestled at the edge of Pikes Peak, one of the highest summits of the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains, Colorado Springs is proudly stepping out of Denver's shadow and is poised to overtake Colorado's capital as the most populous city in the state by 2050, according to state projections.

Named one of the top 10 places to live in the United States in 2022-23 by U.S. News & World Report and one of the "best-performing" large U.S. cities for its job growth and economic stability by the Milken Institute, Colorado Springs is

ready to spring into prominence.

This exponential growth for a city with an estimated population of 506,646 has spurred economic development, highlighted by more than \$2 billion in downtown investments, an 8,000-seat outdoor amphitheater, and a citywide fiber-optic network.

Home to five military bases, the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee and a number of nonprofits, Colorado Springs' identity is as varied as its residents. Looking to tie it all together

to create a unified sense of community and pride, Colorado Springs Switchbacks FC began play in 2015.

"There wasn't a lot of local culture, local pride or identity in the community because people are from all over the place," Switchbacks President Nick Ragain said. "... We wanted to step in and say, 'Hey, we want to help develop this part of the identity to drive pride in the community.'"

Not only were the Switchbacks born to help unify Colorado Springs, but the United Soccer League (USL) expansion franchise plays an integral





“... There’s a certain energy to a game day downtown that we’ve never had before with families and groups of fans converging from all directions to Weidner Field.”

part in the city’s ambitious downtown redevelopment strategy dubbed “City for Champions.”

Including the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Museum, Ed Robson Arena, William J. Hybl Sports Medicine and Performance Center, and Air Force Academy Visitor Center, the initiative officially began in 2013 utilizing state tax dollars from the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade. The Colorado Springs Urban Renewal Authority is forecasting the project will boost the region’s \$1.35 billion tourism industry by attracting approximately 1.2 million visitors annually which will increase retail sales by \$140 million each year and add \$4.4 million in new sales tax revenue for the city annually.

Home to the Switchbacks, the \$50 million Weidner Field (opened on April 24, 2021) is in downtown Colorado Springs, a mere three blocks from the 60,000-square-foot U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Museum.

According to Ragain, during its inaugural

season, Weidner Field and the Switchbacks employed 1,130 people, accounted for approximately 25,000 out-of-state tourists, and generated a \$4 million positive tax impact.

“Weidner Field has had an incredible impact on downtown and the city—measured both directly and indirectly,” said Susan Edmondson, president and CEO of Downtown Partnership of Colorado Springs. “It’s at the forefront of a revitalization of south downtown, attracting hundreds of thousands of people of all ages to what had been a rather blighted area. There’s a certain energy to a game day downtown that we’ve never had before with families and groups of fans converging from all directions to Weidner Field. Often, they’ve met beforehand for a bite to eat, or they may grab a beer after the match, which helps keep our small businesses thriving.

“The greatest indirect benefit of Weidner Field is that, as part of the City for Champions initiative, it set forth a bold vision for our city and proved we could think big and accomplish big things. It’s impossible to fully quantify the value of that kind of determination and confidence. Weidner Field was a significant part of the storytelling around our downtown renaissance that captured the excitement of developers, investors, and new businesses. It’s definitely one of the reasons we’ve seen over \$2 billion in new development in our city center in recent years.”

Serving as a source of energy, optimism, growth, and pride for Colorado Springs, Weidner Field has a gravitational pull positively impacting

surrounding bars, restaurants, hotels, and real estate, resulting in waves of economic growth emanating out from the facility, which hosts hundreds of events annually ranging from soccer to concerts, weddings, conferences, and banquets.

Not only does Weidner Apartment Homes’ Founder Dean Weidner have a stake in the club and naming rights to the stadium, but the 15th-largest apartment owner in the U.S. is also building a seven-floor, 1,200-unit multifamily complex adjacent to the stadium.

Because of the positive impact the Switchbacks and Weidner Field have made on their local community, both are optimal use cases for the USL when presenting opportunities for expansion and redevelopment throughout the U.S.

Currently working on 50 projects around the country, the largest professional soccer organization in North America has found its niche in mid-size markets rather than trying to compete with Major League Soccer—or NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL franchises—in major markets like New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia.



Image Source: Isaiah Downing



Image Source: Isaiah Downing



Image Source: Isaiah Downing

The USL helps bring professional sports to more communities and leverages stadium-anchored developments to revitalize underserved and underdeveloped areas. This is done through overseeing three men’s leagues (USL Championship, USL League One, USL League Two), two women’s leagues (USL Super League, USL W League), one elite player development platform (USL Academy), and a national youth platform (USL Super Y League).

“What we look for is a great community partner,” said Justin Papadakis, USL deputy CEO, COO, and chief real estate officer. “We also really like transformational developments. Our preference has been to

find an area that's been underutilized for a variety of reasons and create a transformational project anchored by a stadium."

"Once we have those two pieces—a great community partner and some underutilized real estate with potential—we work with our city partners to do the rest."

Whether in Spokane, Washington, Texoma, Texas, Fort Myers, Florida, or Antelope Valley, California, the USL is leveraging soccer to fuel mid-size market redevelopment and economic impact.

With templates for downtown developments, repurposing underutilized facili-

ties, or partnering with local colleges and universities, the USL can bring pro sports to the masses, which not only gives residents live entertainment and quality field access for youth but also buoys local economies and neglected areas.

"(Colorado Springs) is a great case study in what would be a smaller market that pro sports would look at," Papadakis said. "It's performing so well and driving hundreds of millions of economic benefits. They're succeeding on the field, off the field, and outside the stadium—and that's how we measure success."

Having qualified for the USL Championship postseason for the third consecutive year, the excitement for the Switchbacks on the field is certainly there, but the club's impact on the burgeoning Colorado city is causing as much enthusiasm if not more.

"Sports is about wins and losses, but there's also so much it creates, and it creates community," Ragain said. "...There's this story and lifestyle that Colorado Springs wants to tell. It just needs some energy behind it. At the end of the day, what the Switchbacks and Weidner Field bring to downtown is energy." ■



Image Source: Colorado Springs Switchbacks FC

LIBRARIES MANAGED DIFFERENTLY

LS&S partners with cities and counties to deliver library managed services that maximize value, drive efficiency, and benefit community leaders and members.



COST SAVINGS



LOCAL CONTROL



EFFICIENCY



INNOVATIVE SERVICES



PERFORMANCE ANALYTICS

“With LS&S, we have been able to significantly increase the level of service to the community, while also reducing annual costs”

- Mayor of Moreno Valley, CA

MOST TRUSTED LIBRARY PARTNER

40+

Years Library Experience

70+

Managed Libraries

96%

Customer Retention Rate

100%

Committed to Library Excellence

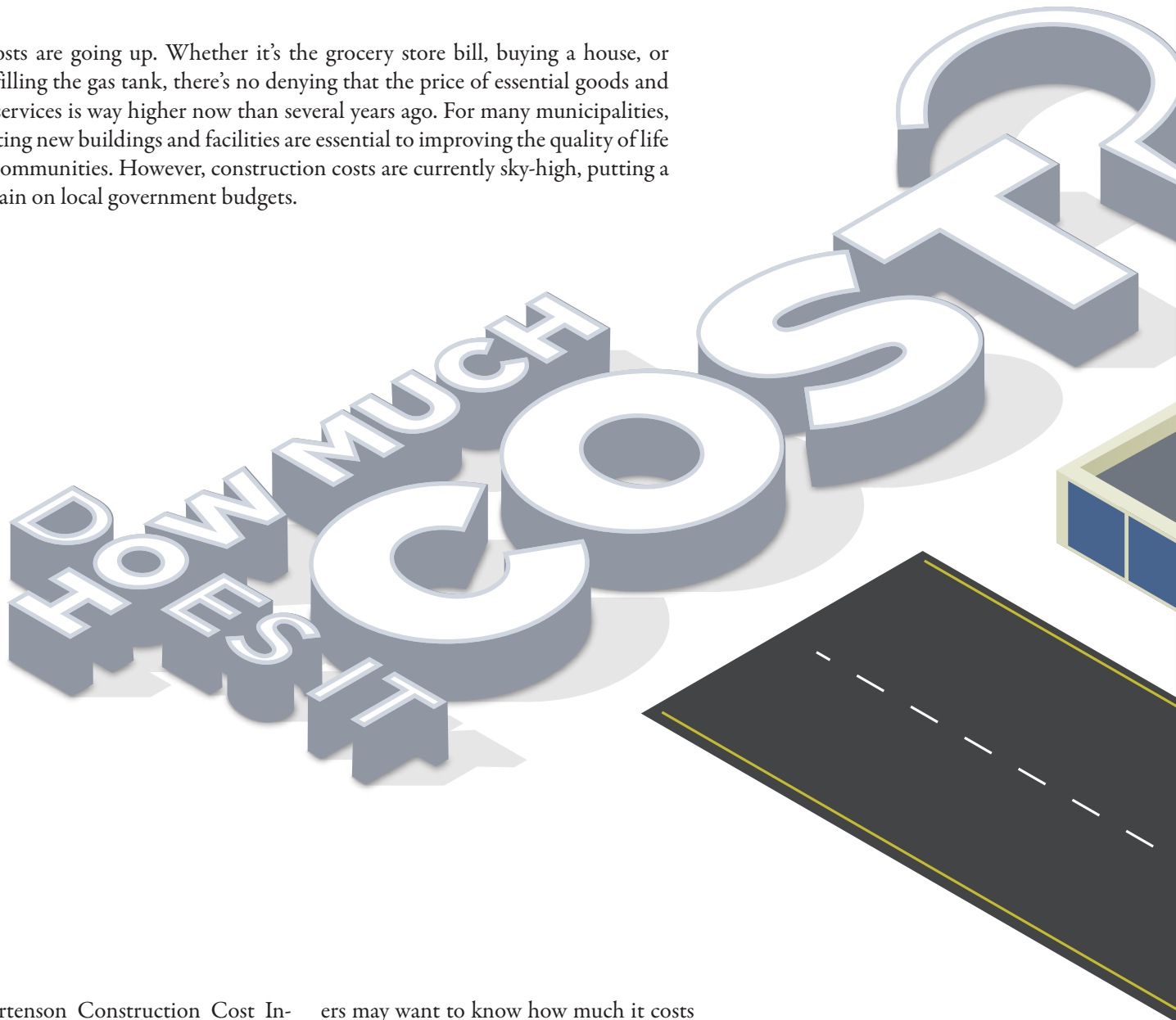


library systems  services

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO BUILD?

By Tyler Williams ≡

Costs are going up. Whether it's the grocery store bill, buying a house, or filling the gas tank, there's no denying that the price of essential goods and services is way higher now than several years ago. For many municipalities, constructing new buildings and facilities are essential to improving the quality of life in their communities. However, construction costs are currently sky-high, putting a major strain on local government budgets.



The Mortenson Construction Cost Index, which tracks non-residential construction costs, found that construction costs were 35 percent higher in the spring of 2023 when compared with 2019. With such a massive spike in construction costs in a short period, local government lead-

ers may want to know how much it costs to construct new municipal buildings and facilities. While not exhaustive, this article will give ballpark estimates of how much it costs to construct select municipal facilities, along with certain challenges associated with the construction process.



\$40 Million

Average cost to construct a 100,000 square foot indoor sports facility



\$3.7 Billion

New 2.5 million square foot convention center in Dallas, Texas



\$100+ Million

Small Airport with runway, taxi ramp, and support structures



\$740 Million

Orange County Convention Center 340,000 square foot expansion



\$80-150 Million

Water treatment plant that treats up to 10 million gallons of water per day

Sports Complexes

On any given Saturday in America, ballfields and gyms are packed with young athletes honing their crafts in the hopes of becoming the next LeBron, Messi, or Brady. And even more are playing to spend time with friends, get in shape, and enjoy all the benefits of sports and recreation. According to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 61.1 percent of children between the age of 6-17 participate in at least one team sport. With that many children playing sports, it's critical for municipalities to develop sports facilities to meet the demand.

According to data provided by The Sports Facilities Companies (SFC), a company that has partnered with over 2,000 communities to plan, develop, and operate sports, recreation, aquatics, and event venues, it costs roughly \$300-350 per square foot to develop an indoor tournament-ready venue (eight or more courts,

150,000-200,000 square feet, on average). The total cost for a venue of that size can range between \$45-70 million. Dan Morton, vice president of Pre-Development Services for SFC, noted that these numbers can vary from project to project and are made up of land or real estate acquisition costs, soft costs (fees for design, engineering, civil, architectural, construction management, procurement, owner's representation, permitting, and inspections) construction costs, fixtures, furnishings, and equipment costs (FF&E), sports equipment, and pre-opening operational soft costs.

Morton went on to say that a site's location will also dictate the overall cost of development. Areas with a high population density or environmental considerations, such as brownfield designation, will drive up development costs. Additionally, inflation and supply chain disruptions have led to a 50-60 percent increase in overall development

costs on average, according to Morton.

In terms of baseball and softball complexes, SFC data shows that the cost per diamond for a turf field (400 square feet) is \$3.4-4.6 million. For a natural grass field of the same dimensions, it's \$2.5-3.4 million. A 10-field baseball or softball complex has an estimated cost range of \$25-46 million.

For multipurpose fields (soccer, lacrosse, or football), SFC data shows that the cost per turf field is \$2.6-3.6 million with natural grass fields costing \$1.8-2.5 million. The overall cost for this type of complex ranges from \$18-36 million for a 10-field complex.

Morton notes that these cost-per-field ranges include fields, site development, parking, and support buildings, but don't include land acquisition and soft costs for operations.



Image Sources: Sand Mountain Park - SoFly Productions

Convention Centers

While slower to recover than the youth sports segment, an increasing amount of people are taking to the road to attend business meetings, conferences, and trade shows.

According to a report from Statista, 41,000 U.S. events are registered on the event platform 10times.com. And cities large and small are either developing or renovating their venues to meet the growing demand. We've listed a couple of examples below to highlight the costs involved in convention center projects.

Dallas, Texas, plans to replace their old convention center with a new, 2.5 million square foot building with an estimated cost of \$3.7 billion or roughly \$1,120 per square foot. The new convention center will include an outdoor park and 2,000 parking spaces, along with a ballroom, a food hall, meeting rooms, and convention space.

The Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Florida, is slated for expansion, which will include a 200,000-square-foot multipurpose venue, 60,000 square feet of meeting room space, a flexible 80,000-square-foot ballroom, and various other upgrades. The 2020 estimate for the renovation was \$605 million. However, the project was put on hold. Recently, the Orlando Business Journal reported that the cost could total up to \$740 million due to inflation.

An August 2022 study analyzing the expected cost of a proposed convention center expansion in Vancouver, Washington, found that a 122,000-square-foot expansion would cost roughly \$68 million, totaling just over \$550 per square foot. Other costs, like a underground parking garage, additional renovations, site work, and a hotel would bring the total cost up to \$164 million, or \$615 per square foot.



Image Sources: Adobe Stock

Water Treatment and Wastewater Treatment Facilities

While not as sexy as sports complexes or convention centers, water and wastewater treatment facilities are critical infrastructure, ensuring safe drinking water and maintaining a high quality of life for residents. The information below is especially critical for civic leaders who are looking to support the demands of growing populations. Kevin Laird, executive vice president of engineering at Goodwyn Mills Cawood (GMC), an architecture and engineering firm, advises communities to be proactive, instead of reactive, in planning for the construction of new water

treatment and wastewater treatment facilities due to the cost associated with these projects. He notes that, due to the high construction cost, he sees more regional treatment facilities than in previous years. These regional treatment facilities have funding from multiple cities, meaning each municipality shares the construction cost.

According to data from GMC, a brand-new water plant ranges from \$8-15 a gallon. A plant treating 10 million gallons daily costs between \$80-150 million. Wastewater plants range between \$15-25 a gallon, making the cost range for this type of facility between \$50-80 million.



Image Source: AdobeStock

Parks

The public's interest in parks was strong before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, during the time of forced isolation, even more people grew to appreciate greenspaces as it was one of the few places people could gather. This is reflected in a study from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) in which 87 percent of survey respondents supported city and state government funding for parks, including their infrastructure, amenities, and programming.

When developing a new park, costs vary based on its amenities, location, and topography, among other factors.

An example of this process can be seen in Tracy, California, a city about 60 miles

south of Sacramento. In October 2022, the community adopted the Tracy City-wide Parks, Recreation & Trails Master Plan Update.

The master plan provided estimated construction costs for a typical five-acre (217,800 square foot) neighborhood park in Tracy. While costs in Tracy won't translate equally to every city in the country, it will give local government leaders a ballpark estimate of how much it costs to build a park from scratch.

The total estimate for a five-acre city park was \$5.4 million with construction and other project costs. Of course, a park with numerous amenities will cost much more than a park with few features. Tracy estimated the cost of specific amenities at a sample five-acre neighborhood park. In

addition to site work, signage, and various project costs, major costs associated with each park are listed below:

- Wood fencing: \$300,000
- Playground (with a shade structure and turf): \$450,000
- 20' x 20' Shelter (for up to 30-32 people): \$150,000
- Double multipurpose court (lighted): \$300,000
- Concrete walkway (8 ft. wide, ½ mile long): \$600,000
- Parallel street parking: \$40,000
- Site furniture (benches, trash cans, picnic tables, bike racks, BBQ grills, etc.): \$130,000

Airports

Even with proper master planning, community buy-in, and an abundance of funding, some municipal facilities can be challenging to build.

Rick Piccolo, CEO of Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport, a small but growing alternative to larger airports in Tampa and Orlando, told Community Playmaker about some of the difficulties associated with constructing an airport. His airport has two runways, one totaling 9,500 feet and the other totaling 5,004 feet. It accommodates four and a half million passengers annually and takes up 1,102 acres. The original terminal was built in 1987 at nearly \$70 million.

“I would say that to build this airport to replicate what we have here now is probably over a billion dollars. We have miles and miles of runway and taxiway. We have two runways. We have the terminal to replicate this is at least a billion dollars if not two or three”, Piccolo said.

The costs of developing airports and their components are due to several factors unique to their construction. Runways are specialized surfaces that must withstand extreme temperatures and support the weight of a plane, which can exceed 100,000 pounds at landing, according to documentation from the Federal Aviation Administration. According to Airportwiz.com, a site dedicated to airport operations, the cost of an airport runway alone can range from \$10-20 million per mile (5,280 feet) on average. The average runway is between 8,000-13,000 feet in length. Other cost factors include land acquisition and preparation, architect fees, construction and materials, and permitting costs.

In many cases, communities are choosing redevelopment over construction of new airports. At Sarasota-Bradenton Interna-

tional Airport, a \$200 million upgrade includes a five-gate terminal expansion, a new baggage screening system, new parking lots, a new ground transportation center, and a new cellphone lot.

By comparison, a \$787 million expansion of Tampa International Airport (which is larger but still considered small in comparison to other international airports) will include a 585,000-square-foot domestic and international terminal with 16 new gates with new customs and security facilities, updated technologies for bag screening, gate check-in, and baggage processing, as well as a new outdoor terrace, concessions, and restrooms.

City Halls

City halls have long been known as places where residents and officials conduct official city business. Utilities are paid, permits are applied for, and city council meetings are held in its confines. However, cities are reimagining the ways these facilities are serving the community, which

Developing a new city hall is between \$350-500 per square foot, depending on the building's amenities.

along with the lingering impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the supply chain, is impacting costs.

“The overarching theme in the city halls that we’re designing today is city halls as community buildings,” said Amy Bell, vice president of Georgia architecture at Goodwyn Mills Cawood (GMC). “These are government buildings and, of course, you have to pay bills, you have to get permits, and you have to do all the city business, but cities are really looking at the facility and the complex around the facility as a way to give back to the citizens.”

According to data from GMC and Bell, the average cost for developing a new city hall is between \$350-500 per square foot, depending on the building's amenities.

A great example of the expanded role of the city hall can be seen in GMC's work in Chamblee, Georgia, a city 15 miles north of Atlanta. The nearly 30,000-square-foot city hall, completed in October of 2022 for \$18 million, features a grand atrium area with modern accents that balance its brick exterior and expansive greenspaces that host the city's summer concert series. The city hall also hosts meetings for local non-profit groups along with concerts and the typical city functions.

Libraries

Libraries are transforming from their role as a place to get books into venues for learning about and utilizing new technologies, community gatherings, and deep-dive research. It's also becoming a symbol of equity in many communities as its resources are available to everyone regardless of socioeconomic status.

According to data from Library Systems & Services (LS&S), a company specializing in library operation and management services, library costs “can vary widely” depending on the development approach used. They offered a few examples of projects in California.

An LS&S official noted, “Moreno Valley's

approach of leasing and improving existing structures for small footprint facilities in strip malls has an upfront cost of \$1.5-3 million. However, new construction for a fairly small library in Moorpark is \$23 million.”

They added, “A multi-branch system that has an efficient building program can save costs when building multiple libraries over a compact time frame of five to ten years. LEED or other sustainability features can increase upfront costs while significantly reducing operating costs. A new library in California could easily cost \$40-50 million, and \$100 million isn’t unheard of for a larger library.”

Another approach they are seeing is multi-branch building programs. In San Jose, California, new library facilities are being developed at 25-50 percent “less-than-market” through a standard approach to designing and construction. “They built a dozen branches that all looked cosmetically different but were essentially iterations on the same design,” according to LS&S officials.

Police and Fire Station

Police and fire stations are essential to the public safety infrastructure of cities of all sizes. However, the approach to bringing them out of the ground differs. Let’s start with police stations. Aside from regional stations built to address a particular part of a city, central police stations are not built often, and in many communities, like in Tampa, Florida, for example, are amongst the oldest buildings in their area. In today’s construction environment, police stations can be quite expensive, which is part of the reason why they aren’t built often.

According to data from Levelset’s 2022 Guide to U.S. Building Commercial Construction Cost per Square Foot, the cost to develop a new police station is \$580

per square foot on average. This can vary depending on the region of the country, details of the building site, and amenities. For example, Milford, Delaware, recently completed a 30,000-square-foot facility for \$17 million or \$583.33 per square foot. In contrast, the renovation of the Phoenix Police Department’s headquarters is anticipated to cost \$180 million for the 500,000-square-foot facility or \$360 per square foot.

In fire station development, the goal is for sites to be integrated into as many areas as feasible to better ensure quick response to emergencies. As cities continue to grow, more fire stations are needed. Data compiled by Mitchell Associates Architects on 44 fire station construction projects in Massachusetts, New York, and Connecticut showed an average cost of \$734 per square foot. The most expensive was a 22,000-square-foot facility in Nantucket, Massachusetts, equipped with apparatus bays, new dispatch and communications equipment, offices, and dormitory space for on-call firefighters, costing \$18.7 million or \$850 per square foot.

The Price of Growth

It’s clear that the cost to develop municipal facilities has risen sharply. Yet, facilities such as fire stations and water treatment plants are vital components of public safety. Parks and libraries enhance the quality of life for residents as does sports complexes and city halls. And as communities grow so does the need for these facilities. For civic leaders, it’s imperative to understand the costs of new facilities and use this information to plan for growth. Their ability to do so can ensure a bright path for their communities. ≡



Image Source: Brandon, Mississippi Parks & Rec



FANNING HOWEY

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FUTURECAST 2024: EMERGING LOCAL GOVERNMENT TRENDS & ISSUES

FROM WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT TO THE RISE OF
TECHNOLOGY, EXPERTS WEIGH IN

By **Johnny Crosskey** 
Suzanne Wentley 

Tyler Williams 
Cameron Connelly 

With the new year upon us, it's time for local government officials to take advantage of emerging trends in 2024 and beyond. Some of the most pertinent ones relate to sports tourism, recreational facilities, technology in local government, workforce development, ARPA, and our aging population. While not an exhaustive list of all the latest trends impacting municipalities, this article will provide local government leaders with some insights into how they can use these focus areas to promote economic development, increase tourism, fund projects, and better serve their communities.

The Collision of Parks and Recreation and Tourism

There was a time not long ago when a recreation center was just a recreation center. It was a basketball court, some multipurpose rooms, and maybe a workout room.

Typically, a park was a patch of greenspace for pick-up soccer matches or to sit around on a beautiful day.

Now parks and recreation centers are all these things, along with a concert space, an aquatics center, a sports tourism destination, a place for trade shows, and so much more. These spaces provide many more purposes for a community, including serving as an economic impact driver for a region.

This convergence can be found in the community of Albertville, Alabama, where Sand Mountain Park & Amphitheater has not only put this town of 22,726 residents on the map but is also an example of a facility that can both drive tourism income and serve the needs of residents. The 120-acre complex has an indoor component with four basketball courts, two competition pools (indoor and out-

This image was generated by Open AI's Dall-e image generator with the prompt "city of the future with parks and happy people, photorealistic style with vivid colors".

door), four baseball fields, five softball fields, five multipurpose fields, a 16-court tennis center, an 8,000-seat amphitheater, a miracle field, and an RV park. The complex has hosted several concert series featuring the likes of Brantley Gilbert and Ludacris, an open ice-skating rink, tons of leagues, and countless sporting events and tournaments.

“There’s a collision between sports tourism and local recreation. You’re seeing a race among cities and suburban towns of all shapes and sizes to develop complexes as people are trying to find new, creative ways to boost their economies,” Mike Kelly, executive vice president of The Sports Facilities Companies (SFC), told Community Playmaker. Kelly leads venue operations for SFC’s SF Network, a collection of nearly 50 sports, recreation, events, and aquatics facilities throughout the United States. While few facilities match the size of Sand Mountain, a growing number of them are developed to delight residents and drive tourism revenue.

“There’s become a demand for venues that serve all purposes,” said Jim Arnold, national director of business development at SFC. “People see the venue, and they want to be able to use it beyond competitions. They don’t want to feel like it’s never available to them. So, we focus on the community’s needs in the planning stages, which influence the design, programming, and operations.”

Arnold says this shift in thinking can be seen in the emergence of non-sports amenities and programming at sports complexes. Family entertainment centers, concert spaces, and playgrounds are becoming more commonplace. And facilities are increasingly opening themselves up to community groups for meetings and hosting a creative array of events like drive-in movies.

“I think the facility that is doing it the best in the entire country right now is Paradise Coast Sports Complex,” said Arnold. The sports tourism facility, located in Naples, Florida, is a hub for outdoor

sports in southwest Florida and hosts various community events.

“You go out there on a Wednesday night, and you look around those fields, and, yes, they have football and soccer. But at the same time, they have spaces where food is served. They have a bar. There may be a Chamber of Commerce networking event happening. They have tailgates for college football games and they provide for those in need. They were also the center for hurricane relief in their region. Paradise Coast has found a way to serve different demographics, age groups, interests, and seasons of life while driving tourism.”

Sports Tourism

Few industry segments have proved as resilient as the sports tourism sector. Both the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic failed to deter growth, and some would argue that the industry became stronger in the wake of both crises.

John David, president and CEO of Sports ETA, a sports tourism industry trade association, offers these insights on sports tourism participation in the wake of COVID-19.

Participation Trends and the COVID-19 Pandemic

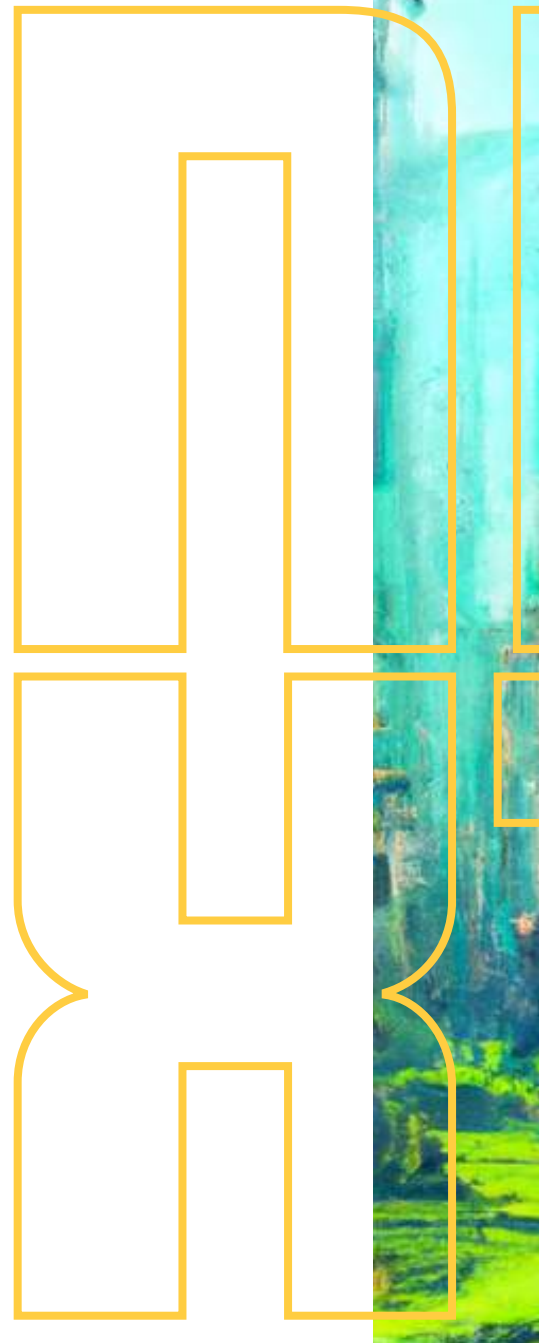
“In 2019, spending in tourism for sports specifically was about \$45 billion. [In 2021], it was almost \$40 billion, close to a full recovery. What we’re going to see in upcoming [2022 and 2023 data] is...numbers that far exceed 2019,” David said.

While sports participation took a major hit during 2020 and much of 2021, many sports organizations “had a massive bump in membership and participation once sport came back to play,” according to David.

Participation growth in events that drive sports tourism was already steady and consistent over the past ten years. After COVID-19, there was a strong bounce back, and the return to in-person activi-

ties “got a lot of families involved in sports that probably wouldn’t have [otherwise].”

The increase in sports participation is a continuation of trends seen before COVID-19. It can also be attributed to a pent-up desire to participate in events once there was a return to in-person activities. David mentioned that sports participants typically take a couple of years until they are ready to participate more competitively in tournaments as opposed to simply competing on a local level. Because of that, “participation in sports tourism is at a very high level, and you see those trends continuing in 2024 and 2025 with





“[Event organizers] could go to a larger city with a \$215 rate in a high-demand market. They could also pick a smaller market with a \$149 rate,” David said.

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“Rather than developing a venue that follows the thought of ‘programming for Tuesdays,’ we’re seeing facilities developed that provide opportunities for residents and drive revenue Monday through Sunday.”

Sports tourism is also becoming a focal point for municipalities across the country because many places now see its true potential as a means to promote economic development and attract visitors. For example, in Louisville, Kentucky, a major convention city in their region, “sports tourism has now superseded all of the other verticals,” according to David.

The Future Is Now: Governments Embrace Technology

More and more communities are turning to technology solutions to create operational efficiency and enhance the quality of life for residents. Technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), drones, and license plate recognition (LPR) cameras are being implemented throughout the United States to aid vulnerable populations and support public safety efforts. Data, especially from geographic information systems (GIS), are being used to develop more equitable zoning and attack climate change issues.

The futuristic flying cars of *The Jetsons* aren’t so far off for some American municipalities — just look at how the city of Arlington, Texas, delivers food to the needy.

Thanks to a matching federal grant, city officials are using drones to bypass traffic and gas stations to bring boxes of farm-fresh produce straight to the front door of those who struggle with reliable mobility.

Arlington’s \$1.6 million project, which will deliver 300 boxes while researching the feasibility of battery-powered drones, is just one of the latest examples of how cities are using technology for creative solutions to otherwise challenging problems.

While not everyone is comfortable with the rise of AI and other novel innovations, high-tech tools could help some communities save resources and money, reduce pollution, and improve the lives of residents.

Police Drones and Cameras

Feeding the hungry isn’t the only thing a drone can do. Some cities, like Riviera Beach, Florida, and Salinas, California, have adopted a drone-based program called Shot Spotter. Drones identify the sound of a gunshot and alert authorities to the nearly exact location of the gun — saving lives and increasing the chances of catching criminals.

Drones have also been used for surveillance when a high volume of people congregate, such as over the recent Labor Day holiday in New York City. Cameras, which use license plate recognition software, have been used to collect fees for parking and monitor highway usage. These tools reduce costs and risks to humans.

Robotic Process Automation

Meanwhile, other cities are using robotic process automation, or RPA, to alleviate employees from simple, repetitive tasks. RPA “bots” are designed to improve the accuracy and speed of jobs like approving license renewals or verifying documents. These systems could help with payroll management, data entry, and monitoring for regulatory agencies.

Often, this technology is connected with wireless communications and office upgrades known as SaaS, or software as a

the maturity of those new [participants] into sports”.

The Impact of Inflation

Sports participation and tourism will continue to increase, but participants on a budget must contend with soaring hotel rates for sporting events. David said that in 2019-2020, the average daily rate for sporting events was around \$130 a night for a family, but in August 2023, it grew to about \$188. Rising hotel prices could open opportunities for smaller cities to attract sporting events.



citizens in the future.

Libraries

Libraries are evolving to keep pace with the evolution of cultural preferences. To remain relevant, libraries are investing in technology, changing up their offerings, and embracing their opportunity as a community “third place.”

Libraries and the Use of Data

Maureen DeLong, chief marketing officer at Library Systems & Services, noted that a significant trend impacting libraries is the rise of consumer data, which can come from the library system or by communicating directly with the public. Like many other businesses, libraries collect data through means such as social media, email marketing, and census data.

Librarians today harness the power of technology to enhance and streamline their services in ways that have a deeper impact when visiting your local branch. They employ advanced cataloging

systems and database management tools to organize and access vast collections of digital and physical resources. Librarians also leverage online databases, e-books, and e-journals to give patrons easy access to information from anywhere.

Additionally, they are increasing access to events, services, and resources using social media platforms and websites. Moreover, librarians are skilled in assisting patrons with technology-related inquiries, such as helping them navigate research databases, e-readers, and computer software. In essence, technology has become an integral tool in the modern librarian’s toolkit, enabling them to adapt to the evolving information landscape and efficiently meet their patrons’ diverse needs.

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In this way, libraries play a vital role in enriching the social fabric of society by providing a neutral, inclusive, and democratic third place where individuals can come together to share knowledge and experiences.

service. Governments are storing information in the “cloud,” rather than servers in administration offices, for enhanced safety and accessibility.

AI/GIS Data-Driven Decision-Making

GIS, which is short for geographic information system, can transpose a variety of data into zoning maps, property information maps, and lot boundary maps. Planners and engineers then use this technology to provide information elected officials

need when envisioning future development concepts.

Some municipalities are also exploring the benefits of AI. They use AI’s real-time data to make informed decisions, create machine-learning programs to track federal grants or determine priorities for public infrastructure needs.

Perhaps the most challenging part of integrating this kind of technology isn’t overcoming the fear of the unknown but seeing beyond the current horizons to how governments can improve the lives of

Broadening Access to Technology

Libraries are increasingly implementing technologies such as virtual reality (VR), 3D printing, and AI to enhance programs and learning opportunities. DeLong noted that libraries want to allow community members who don't have these technologies at home a chance to experience them.

Homestead, Florida, a suburb of Miami, is home to one of the nation's most innovative libraries. The "Cybrarium" is a 23,000-square-foot, multi-floor high-tech facility that features a children's theater, a VR cube, a maker space with a 3D printer, a Steampunk Lounge with an 1896 Chandler and Price letterpress and Book Mountain, and an interactive sculpture that rises from the first floor to a ceiling-high solar system. The Cybrarium aims to meet patrons' emerging needs by offering traditional library services in an innovative environment.

Libraries Role as a Third Place

Society's concept of "third place" is a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. In addition to homes (the first place) and workplaces (the second place), libraries are emerging as a welcoming and inclusive environment as a third place where individuals can gather, connect, and engage. They provide a neutral ground that encourages social interaction, learning, and community building through a wide range of events and programs. On any given day, your local library may host a book club, a financial or career workshop, a lecture from a world-renowned thought leader, or story time for kids. Furthermore, libraries often offer flexible seating arrangements, access to information and technology, and a quiet space for studying or contemplation, all for free, making it stand apart from bookstores or coffee



Image Source: The Homestead Cybrarium
Library Systems & Services, LLC

houses, which perform similar functions at a cost.

Workforce Development and Recruiting the Next Generation of Employees

The ongoing pandemic and the resulting shift in work dynamics have sparked a mass exodus of workers, popularly dubbed "The Great Resignation." As a result, many local government sectors struggle to fill vacancies, with the most significant impact felt in essential service departments, such as sanitation, public safety, and healthcare. However, the problem is not unique to any particular department or location. The aging population of government employees is retiring in droves, leaving alarming gaps that will continue to grow in the coming decade.

Because of "The Great Resignation" and the "Silver Tsunami" of retiring employees, workforce development has become a top priority for local and state governments in the U.S. Enhancing the skills of current staff and developing the next generation of government employees is a vital aspect of attracting and retaining talent during this time of labor market upheaval. The emphasis is on providing opportunities for continuous learning and professional growth, which helps improve the existing workforce and serves as an at-

tractive proposition for potential recruits.

Local and state governments are becoming more creative in their recruitment strategies to attract new talent. There's a shift towards offering competitive compensation packages, flexible work arrangements, and opportunities for career advancement. These strategies aim to attract a diverse pool of candi-

dates, including recent graduates, mid-career professionals looking for a change, and retirees seeking part-time or consultancy roles.

In Panama City Beach, Florida, Mayor Mark Sheldon told Community Playmaker that they have the "gold standard" of pension plans, an important part of retaining employees. According to Mayor Sheldon, Panama City Beach also provides free health insurance for employees and instills a pay study every two years.

Moreover, governments are investing in partnerships with educational institutions to attract young talent. Internship, apprenticeship, and job shadowing programs provide students with real-world experience and a taste of public service. This early exposure can inspire students to consider government careers, thereby helping replenish the talent pool.

On the national level, the Department of Energy has a robust internship initiative called the Omni Technology Alliance Internship Program. The 10-week program is aimed at college and graduate students interested in cybersecurity. The internship offers a stipend that covers the students' living wages, housing, transportation, and relocation expenses while providing them with industry knowledge and experience. By offering the internship program with a stipend, more students can afford to participate, and the Depart-

ment of Energy has an even larger talent pool from which to recruit.

The Looming ARPA Deadline

Some community leaders are coming into 2024 with a major sense of urgency. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which provides federal aid to state, county, tribal, and local governments to support a variety of projects in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, has a December 31, 2024 deadline for all funds to be obligated by its recipients. The funds must be spent by December 31, 2026, or returned to the U.S. Treasury Department. The term “obligated” is defined as “an order placed for property and services and entering into contracts, sub-awards, and similar transactions that require payment,” according to the U.S. Treasury Department.

On the surface, it appears that cities must determine their ARPA plans and launch them before the end of this year. The reality is much more challenging. In a study by the National League of Cities, 54 percent of cities, towns, and villages start their fiscal year on July 1. Those communities have a few more months to obligate ARPA funds. However, the complexity of certain projects, including infrastructure or housing projects, must be considered as vendor selection or contracting may take a lengthy amount of time. If your fiscal year started a few weeks ago, on January 1, it may already be too late.

While the communities that have not taken advantage of available ARPA funds may be considered laggards, several notable challenges may stand in the way of implementation. A study and interviews conducted by the Brookings Institute found that barriers to utilizing ARPA funds included timelines for spending ARPA funds, differing opinions among city leaders on how to use funds, and uncertainty about program guidelines. Additionally, there was concern about spending ARPA funds on new staff and programs in many cities without the prospect of future reve-

nue beyond the program.

To overcome these challenges, Michael Gleeson, legislative director of finance, administration, and intergovernmental relations for National League of Cities, suggests in his article on the ARPA deadline that cities classify State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) as “lost revenue,” allowing them to use the money for government services.

While these challenges hampered some communities, others nimbly rose above them in ways that drove recovery and long-term economic growth. In El Paso, Texas, SLFRF funds were used to develop a program called Financial Assistance for Safety, Technology, and Economic Resilience (FASTER). FASTER provides grants, loans, and technical assistance to small, women-owned, and minority-owned businesses throughout rural and unincorporated areas. The city also uses ARPA funding to rebuild water and sewer infrastructure in communities near the US-Mexico border.

The Continuing Emergence of Public-Private Partnerships (P3s)

Public-private partnerships, or P3s, are an emerging way for municipalities to fund projects. “The biggest [P3 trend] I’ve seen so far is all the funding available from the bipartisan infrastructure law that has really jump-started infrastructure projects of all kinds, including solar, transportation, water utilities, etc.,” according to Mary Scott Nabers, president/CEO of Strategic Partnerships Inc. and author of “Inside the Infrastructure Revolution – A Roadmap for Rebuilding America.”

“Several [of those projects] are adopting P3 models, as seen in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers inaugural North American P3 project for the Red River flood and the District of Columbia’s street lighting initiative. New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority may also pursue its first P3. Despite some states reducing their reliance on private finance due to

enhanced tax revenues and federal stimulus, the trend towards P3 is expected to continue, supported by new state legislation,” Nabers said.

“Though fiscal challenges persist, P3’s value remains high, particularly if economic conditions stabilize. The attention now shifts from financial capital to assembling skilled teams for successful infrastructure development through P3s,” Nabers added.]

Becoming Blue Zones: Community Leaders Support Aging Populations

It’s not just your town or your President: The American population is getting older.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by the beginning of the next decade, everyone in the Baby Boomer generation will be older than 65. Add in that the birth rate is declining, and the average age of U.S. citizens is higher than ever.

By 2030, the average American is predicted to be 39 years old, with 21 percent of residents being 65 and older.

This reality is causing government officials to plan new infrastructure and policies while working with private and nonprofit sectors to support the aging population.

Perhaps few are as aware of the needs of seniors as Howard Duvall, a city council member-at-large for Columbia, South Carolina. He will retire at age 80 in 2024 after 50 years of public service. He’s been working for decades to create the kind of community where he, his wife, and other residents his age can stay active and healthy for years to come.

Recently, the city hosted a workshop on ways to be a “blue zone,” regions studied by scientists for residents with exceptional longevity.



“We’ve created opportunities for older generations who want to be active,” Councilmember Duvall said. “We’re trying to replicate the success of other cities around the world with elements that make the blue zones blue.”

Ways that cities support their aging populations include:

- **Easy Mobility:** Seniors need reliable public transportation, safe bike lanes, sidewalks, or walking paths that help them complete daily tasks.
- **Safety:** Visible police officers and programs, like Shot Spotter, helped the city of Columbia reduce gun violence to help

seniors feel safer, Duvall said.

- **Healthy Diets:** Duvall said the city is working with other organizations to deliver fresh produce to food deserts so seniors and other residents can access healthy foods.

- **Housing Opportunities:** Duvall and his wife recently downsized to a condominium, and developing more senior-friendly housing options can help communities avoid problems common with isolation.

Councilmember Duvall said many of these initiatives required creative collaboration among government, private, and nonprofit agencies. For example, city officials are supporting a mobile food pantry

that partners with regional farms and a delivery program to bring affordable food to those with transportation challenges.

Duvall is a year younger than President Joe Biden, who is running for re-election at age 81. Still, the long-time council member said he looked forward to staying physically and mentally active, just like so many do in the blue zones around the world.

“Another common denominator in the blue zones is drinking red wine,” he laughed. “I was happy to see that!”

Beginning 2024

Cities must stay on top of trends and citizen preferences to ensure continued growth, relevance, and overall well-being. As urban centers evolve, staying attuned to changing demographics, technological advancements, and societal shifts is crucial for effective urban planning and governance. By understanding the preferences and needs of their residents, cities can make informed decisions regarding infrastructure, transportation, public services, and community development. This proactive approach fosters inclusivity, enhances quality of life, and promotes economic vitality. Ultimately, a city’s ability to adapt to evolving trends and citizen desires is integral to its ability to thrive and provide its residents with a high standard of living. ☰



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Recently, the city hosted a workshop on ways to be a “blue zone,” regions studied by scientists for residents with exceptional longevity. Blue zones include Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; and Loma Linda, California.

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THE FUTURE OF AI AND CITIES

HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN HARNESS THE POWER OF GENERATIVE AI

By James Hicks ≡



Image Source: Tristan Makaroff

While generative artificial intelligence (AI) applications have exploded over the last year, many have been regarded as a novelty or something to generate dad jokes. The reality is that generative AI is becoming increasingly used in the private – and public – sector to automate tasks, provide greater efficiency, and deliver higher-quality service.

And no, ChatGPT and generative AI were not used in the making of this article.

“Local governments across the United States are increasingly leveraging generative AI to address a variety of challenges and opportunities unique to

their jurisdictions,” said Micah Gaudet, Maricopa, Arizona’s deputy city manager. Gaudet has devoted his personal time to exploring the world of generative AI.

Gaudet’s interest in using AI began after viewing a discussion online about ChatGPT.

“Initially, I experimented with it for personal use – crafting bedtime stories for my child and generating dad jokes,” Gaudet said. “However, it wasn’t long before I recognized its potential as a professional tool.”

What Is Generative AI?

Merriam-Webster defines generative AI as “artificial intelligence that is capable of generating new content in response to a submitted prompt by learning from a large reference database of examples.”

For Gaudet, generative AI refers to a cadre of applications from ChatGPT, Claude, and Bard to other predictive text features in word processing that “assist in automating tasks, streamlining administrative processes, and enhancing citizen engagement.”

While many look at generative AI as a gag, some are finding ways of harnessing its

power. The key to harnessing generative AI for local governments, Gaudet believes, is strategic planning. “Local governments should first focus on what they need to do to deliver exceptional value and benefit to their community,” Gaudet said.

He compares generative AI to a car’s gas pedal: “The accelerator is a great tool if we are going in the right direction.”

How Communities Use Generative AI

In a video on his YouTube channel, Civic Innovation, Gaudet shows how local governments can use ChatGPT to evaluate a proposal. He interacts with the chatbot to fine-tune its analysis and show how to input prompts.

Gaudet also demonstrates how it can generate an executive summary, troubleshoot an emergency operations plan, write a LinkedIn post, utilize plugins to analyze a budget, create a human resources training video, draft ordinances, and analyze social media.

“Our biggest thing that we have used it on recently is the entire rewrite of our mobile home park ordinance,” John Weidl, Whitewater, Wisconsin’s city manager told City Manager Unfiltered podcast host Joe Turner on an episode about ChatGPT. “We used another community’s (ordinance) as a starting comparable and then inserted our own language in areas where we wanted things modified more to match our existing document.”

Weidl found that ChatGPT could foster teamwork by starting the ordinance drafting process and then departments can work together to fine-tune it.

Weber County, Utah County Clerk and Auditor Ricky Hatch uses ChatGPT to

draft job descriptions and modernize transaction processing.

“It can do check runs instantaneously when that usually takes me 20 minutes and probably catches aberrations better than I could,” Hatch told the National Association of Counties’ (NACO) Charlie Ban. “It’s a good second set of eyes, but we’re not setting it loose to make decisions.”

While some cities are using the power of AI to streamline operational processes, others are using it to minimize traffic congestion and maximize road safety. Phoenix, Arizona, along with cities in 13 states, have turned to AI startup NoTraffic’s SaaS (software as a service) platform to solve these issues. NoTraffic installs sensors onto existing infrastructure on a variety of roadways and challenging intersections. These sensors collect data that is coupled with data from autonomous vehicles to

“It can do check runs instantaneously when that usually takes me 20 minutes and probably catches aberrations better than I could,” said Hatch, “It’s a good second set of eyes, but we’re not setting it loose to make decisions.”

determine an area’s vehicle and pedestrian movement.

The NoTraffic system predicts the path of vehicles and their impact on intersections, allowing cities to better manage traffic patterns. The system also promotes pedestrian safety by predicting when drivers may run red lights and when pedestrians may cross streets.

What Are Generative AI’s Limitations for Local Government?

While one city may find success with a specific use of generative AI, another may not. “The limitations of using generative AI in the public sector are multifaceted and often specific to individual local governments,” Gaudet said.

He points out that legal constraints and state-specific privacy and public records laws could be a problem for the use of AI. Laws in one state might not be the same as in another state.

Concerns about AI’s applicability to local government have caught the eye of national associations. NACO has established an Artificial Intelligence Exploratory Committee to look at policies and practices for the use of generative AI in counties.

Also, issues of bias and inaccuracies could prove to be challenging. “Regardless of whether a document is manually drafted, collaboratively created, or AI-augmented, the individual or entity signing off on it must assume full responsibility for its content,” Gaudet said.

Generative AI can produce significant improvements in local government, but it comes with certain responsibilities. “Adopting AI should be a carefully

considered decision, tailored to each local government's specific needs and legal frameworks," Gaudet said.

To support local government officials, Gaudet developed a course, *Unlocking ChatGPT for the Public Sector*, to guide those interested in using generative AI tools for municipal government functions. The eight-hour, self-paced online course comes with a library of prompts and resources that are tailored to governing locally.

"I'm not a tech guy, but I see immense value in generative AI," Gaudet said. "My aim is to encourage local governments to thoughtfully integrate AI into their operations, not merely for the sake of

efficiency, but to enhance the quality of services provided to their communities."

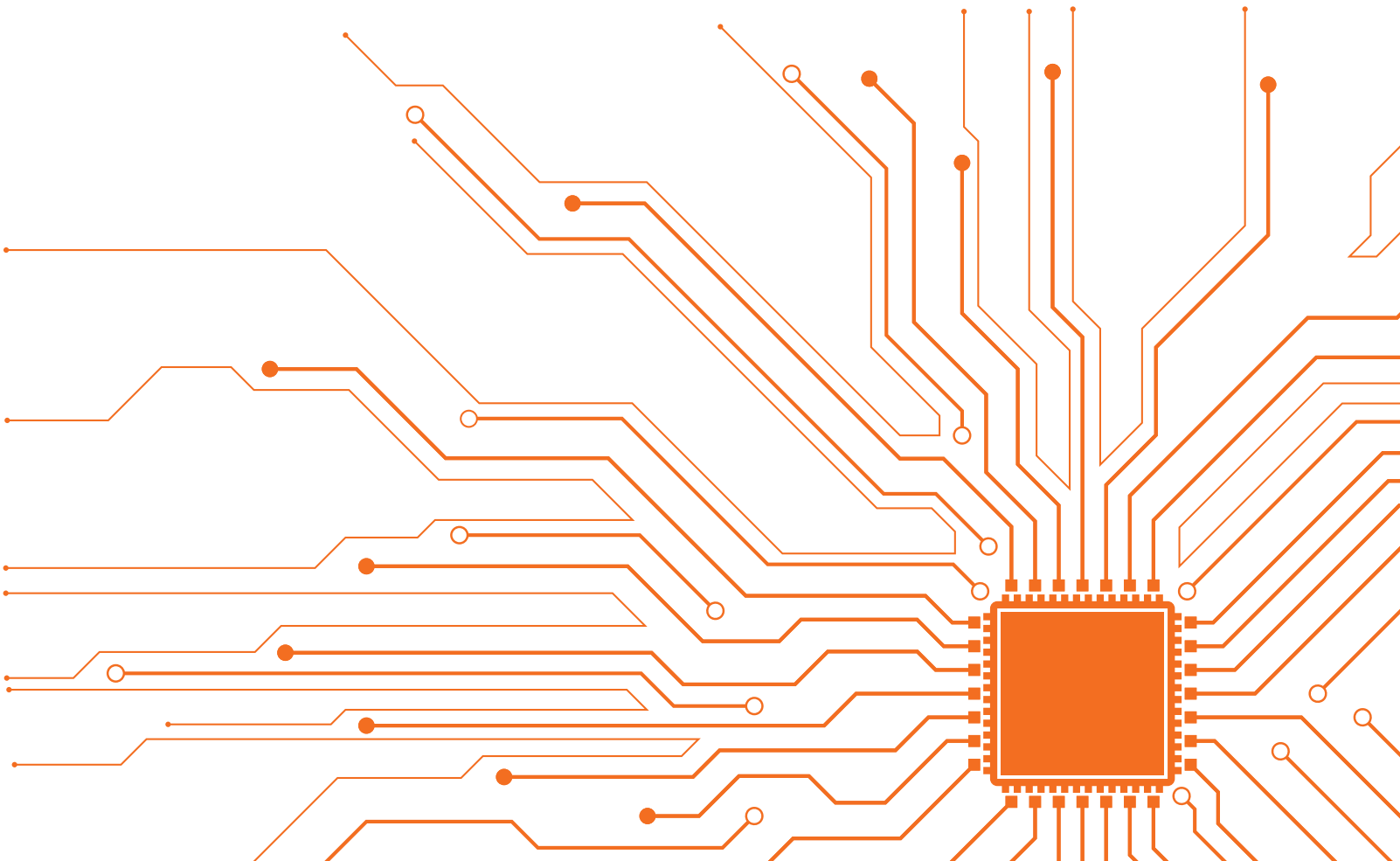
What Is the Future of Generative AI in Local Government?

Generative AI provides a chance to increase productivity, deliver higher-quality services, and renew public trust. "The future lies in leveraging this technology responsibly and effectively to bring about meaningful change where accountability and responsibility are embraced at the lowest possible levels in a public sector organization," Gaudet said.

New advances in technology can cause disruption. Gaudet says it's long overdue.

"The future of local governments and generative AI is poised for transformative change," Gaudet said. "The public sector, for too long, tolerated underperformance and mediocrity."

Fears over AI replacing human jobs continue to be a concern but that is something he believes should be confronted. "If AI can serve as a catalyst to eliminate inefficiency and elevate the quality of work, then it should be wholeheartedly embraced." ■



Decades in the Making

Perkins&Will



*Rogue Credit Union Community Complex
Medford, Oregon*

COURT



Image Source: Visit Macon



OPPORTUNITY

By Judy Leand 

Call it the power of positive dinking: there are about 36.5 million pickleball players in the U.S., according to a study released in January 2023 by the Association of Pickleball Professionals. This obliterates previous estimates of the sport growing to 6-8 million players in 2022 based on previous years.

According to the Sports and Fitness Industry Association, pickleball has been the fastest-growing sport in America for the past three years, and participation has increased an average of 158.6 percent year over year. Moreover, the game isn't just for seniors—players ages 18-34 comprise the most significant percentage of current pickleball players at 28.8 percent nationwide. With such skyrocketing popularity and demand for facilities, it's no wonder that more communities want to get in on the action.

There's no doubt that pickleball can contribute to a community's physical and financial health, so the question for many locales isn't whether they should add pickleball to their program offerings, but how.

How Much Does It Cost To Build a Pickleball Facility?

There are currently 10,724 pickleball courts in the country—clearly not enough to keep up with demand. “Pickleball is exploding, and it's played in a lot of public facilities. There's a court shortage, and municipalities want to build courts,” says Dan Santorum, president and CEO of the Professional Pickleball Registry (PPR). “Everyone is battling over courts. Right now, pickleball is encroaching on other courts such as tennis, volleyball, and basketball, so there is a need for more pickleball courts and facilities.”

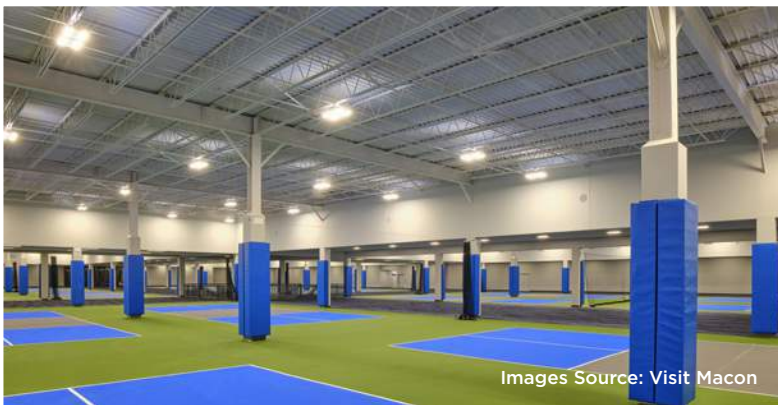
However, building new courts, retrofitting existing ones, or even redeveloping spaces such as vacant malls isn't an inexpensive proposition, so it's important to understand the costs involved before committing to a project. Factors such as site development, location, amenities (lighting, seating, and fencing), construction, and materials are all part of the equation.

According to data from a recent project from The Sports Facilities Companies'

(SFC) development services arm, an outdoor venue with eight courts (four of which included shade structures), single-style benches, and lighting cost \$701,000 or \$87,625/court.

USTA's Tennis Venue Services manager, Amelia Storer, notes that while costs will vary depending on the project, indoor courts (including court nets, curtains, foundations, court paving and surfacing, air conditioning, and lighting) typically cost \$450,000 per court. Support space (offices, restrooms, check-in, and locker rooms) can total \$350 per square foot.

Outdoor courts (including court paving and surfacing, fencing, nets, and striping) come in at about \$150,000 per court. Outdoor asphalt courts are a bit less expensive at \$90,000 per court. Resurfacing, which is needed every three to five years, runs about \$7,500 per court, while LED lighting (including electrical, poles, and fixtures) is approximately \$40,000 per court. Asphalt drives and parking are roughly \$4.45 per square foot and site work and utilities are about \$150,000 per acre.



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Morrison anticipates that if the repurposed venue holds about 100 events annually at the amphitheater and has tournaments at the pickleball facility, the annual economic impact could total \$100 million to \$125 million.

Funding can come from various sources, such as government bonds, taxes, grants, outside investments, and business partnerships. It's also helpful to note that investment in pickleball courts and facilities, whether dedicated or mixed-use, has the potential to boost economic impact by attracting locals and visitors eager to play pickleball recreationally or competitively in tournaments. Once a pickleball venue is up and running, it can also help draw other businesses to the area, such as restaurants, hotels, retail, and other attractions.

Alternatives To Building New Courts

Other options for communities without the budget to build new courts include using an existing tennis or sports court by setting up temporary netting and pickleball lines. According to information from SFC, a tennis court can accommodate four pickleball courts, and a basketball court can hold three to four courts. Utilizing these surfaces as a cost-effective method for meeting the demand is not uncommon. In a survey of sports venues

within SFC's SF Network that offer pickleball programming, 67 percent of venues use non-pickleball surfaces to play games.

Harvey Greenidge, general manager of Highlands Sports Complex (Triadelphia, West Virginia), operates one of those venues. His team added permanent lines to their basketball courts, accommodating up to 18 pickleball courts. They have open play several times per week, rent the courts to groups, and have recently started an adult league. He said that putting down permanent lines is not only easier on his staff (they aren't constantly retaping lines), but it also meets surging demand for the sport in his area. "We could always add more capacity, and if we decide to resurface our courts, we'll add more lines so that we can have more pickleball courts," said Greenidge.

Meeting the Pickleball Demand in Macon

A great example of a community taking the plunge into pickleball is Macon, Georgia. Macon's Tattnall Square Pick-

leball & Tennis Center, which has 26



courts and hosts large tournaments, is already one of the best pickleball facilities in the country. However, the Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority has worked to increase Macon's capacity to host even more pickleball players with the conversion of the 1.1-million-square-foot Macon Mall into what is being billed

as the world's largest indoor pickleball facility. The new Rhythm & Rally Sports and Events features 32 dedicated courts, a pro shop, and concessions.

"The mall is a 75-acre tract in the middle of our community, which back in its heyday was the largest mall in the southeast United States. We were looking for a way to reimagine this particular area of our community that had become economically depressed, and [we were also] looking at 1 million square feet of blight if we didn't do something about it," says Lester Miller, mayor of Macon-Bibb County. "We negotiated a deal with Hull Property Group to work out a tax exchange where we got an appraisal on the property of what we were going to put into that property. They would get to give us half of the property after the first day, and over the next several years, we would receive the rest of the



property. We could get any part of the property they didn't exclusively keep for pretty much \$1 a year."

According to Alex Morrison, Macon-Bibb County's director of Planning and Public Spaces, the city of Macon already hosted eight to 10 pickleball tournaments a year, and with a larger indoor facility, they can

attract even more players. He went on to say, "We can have another eight to 10 (tournaments) a year that are each drawing 600 to 1,200 players who can comfortably play on our 32 indoor courts while also enjoying the other amenities—pickleball during the day and amphitheater concerts at night."

Morrison anticipates that if the repurposed venue holds about 100 events annually at the amphitheater and has tournaments at the pickleball facility, the annual economic impact could total \$100-125 million.

Pickleball and the Pwock in the Room

While pickleball certainly has a plethora of positives, one thing can drive those within earshot crazy: the constant pwock, pwock, pwock sounds emanating from nearby courts.

"Because of its growth, there's been a huge gap in supply versus demand, so many parks and rec entities have exercised what they believe to be both their right and responsibility to serve the public and, in doing so, have been converting community parks and tennis courts that perhaps weren't used before into pickleball courts," explains Carl Schmits, USA Pickleball managing director of Facilities Development and Equipment Standards, told Community Playmaker. "The downside is that it could create an issue if it's done without any expertise in an acoustic test or planning."

To address the noise problem, USA Pickleball is working with various organizations to conduct multiple acoustic studies on equipment and materials while implementing incentive programs for manufacturers to develop quieter paddles and offering assistance to communities that want to build pickleball facilities. A proactive approach is encouraged, such

as planning where courts will be located and, if they are near residential locations, what equipment or barriers can be implemented to lessen the noise.

The pickleball racket, so to speak, isn't just limited to outdoor courts. Morrison of Georgia's Macon-Bibb County told Community Playmaker that one of the major considerations in how they developed the facility was noise concerns. To meet this concern, acoustical ears and drywall in pods around courts were built. They're also hanging carpet squares and other items to absorb sound.

Other Pickleball Considerations

Once a municipality decides to embrace pickleball, thought should also be put into handling player demand. "Municipalities have to manage court time," says PPR's Santorum. "If the same court surface is to be used for various court sports, there should be a schedule designating the days and hours of play, much like ice rinks do with ice hockey, figure skating, recreational skating, and the like. There should be set times that work for pickleball players."

Another consideration for municipalities is whether to build tournament facilities. Assuming that funding and space are available, Santorum's answer is yes. "Tournaments are a moneymaker and can have a great economic impact. Pickleball is so hot now, and it's a terrific way for municipalities to make some money. You can build events by getting local and larger business communities involved, and there are also sponsorship options, such as leveraging space on court wind-screens for company names and logos." He concludes, "Take advantage of the pickleball phenomenon—everyone's talking about it!" ■

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UPCOMING PLAYMAKER EVENTS

04.11.24
PLAYMAKER SUMMIT:GA

Location:
Rhythm & Rally Sports & Events
Macon, Georgia

Summit: GA will feature a panel of experts and city leaders to discuss how cities can capture economic development opportunities and elevate community recreation through pickleball and learn how Macon became a pickleball destination.

FEBRUARY WEBINAR

Optimizing the Performance of Your
Aquatics Assets

In this webinar, we examine the complexities of optimizing the functionality of aquatic facilities and transforming them into thriving community assets. The panel will address financial, regulatory, and logistical challenges and provides insights for overcoming obstacles and maximizing the performance of aquatics venues.

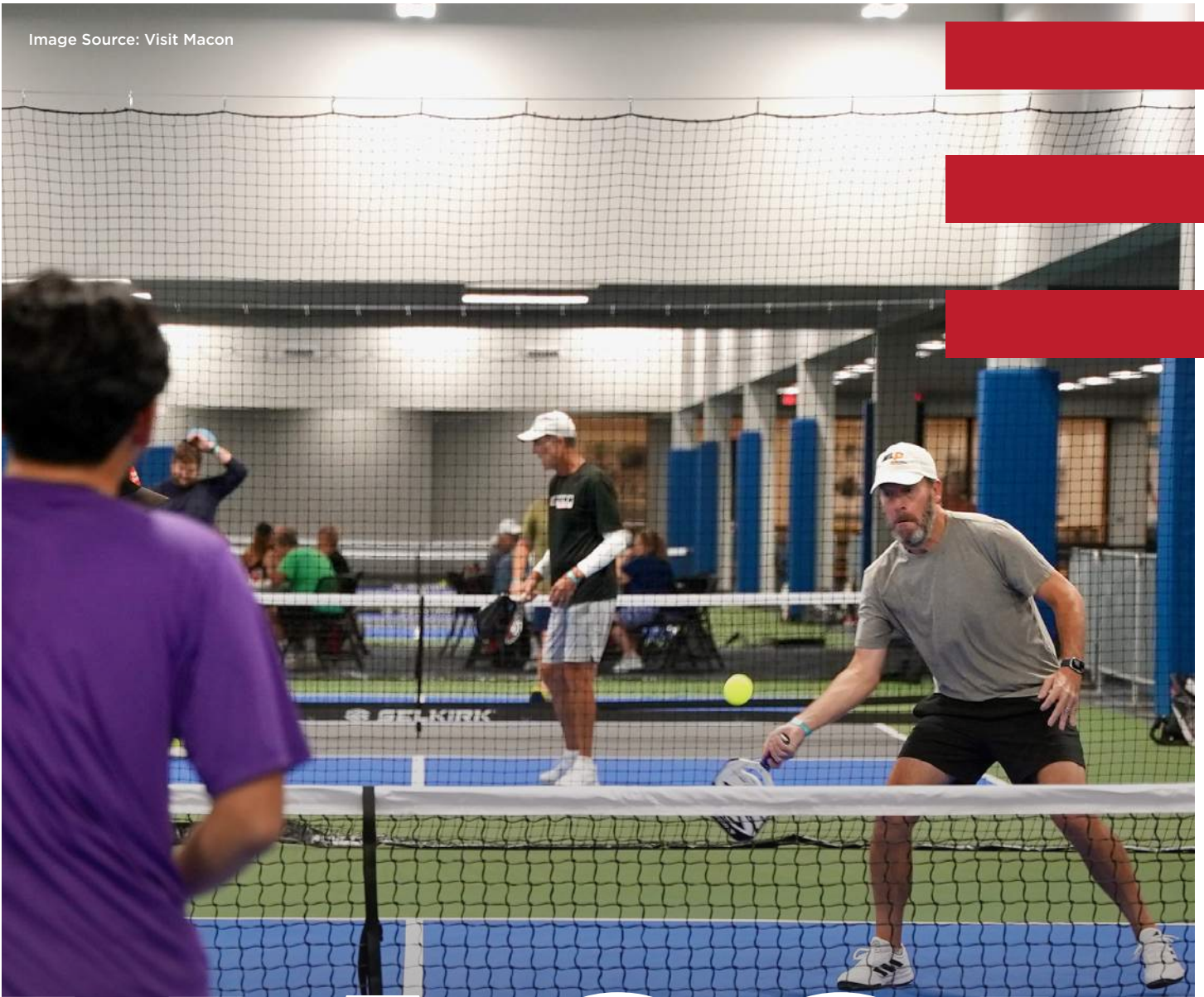
March WEBINAR

Beyond Playgrounds: Navigating the
Intersection of Parks & Recreation with
Sports Tourism

Join us for an insightful exploration of the dynamic collision between local Parks & Recreation departments and the booming sports tourism industry. In this webinar, we will delve into real-world examples from communities like Albertville, Alabama, where innovative approaches have turned local parks into national sports and entertainment destinations.

communityplaymaker.com/events

Image Source: Visit Macon



MACCON GEORGIA

Macon, Georgia is staking its claim as the “pickleball capital of the world.” The newly opened Rhythm and Rally Sports and Events features 32 pickleball courts, a full food and beverage offering, and a pro shop. The name, while giving a nod to action-packed pickleball play, pays homage to Macon’s rich musical history. Otis Redding, Little Richard, and Jason Aldean are all from the area. ☰

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