



# Social Equity

## Plays Key Role in New Braunfels' New Recreation Center

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and Stephen Springs

**N**ew Braunfels, established by a German prince and military officer in the 1840s, might not receive the same amount of attention as larger cities in Texas, but there's a reason it's among the top 10 fastest-growing communities in the United States.

This San Antonio suburb of 75,000 residents is home to museums, wineries and other attractions that bring many visitors to the area. But, its decades-long emphasis on quality-of-life issues has also earned New Braunfels status as a leader in local parks and recreation opportunities. In just a few decades, the city has evolved from a small town with both well-known and hidden-gem regional attractions, to a booming and diverse community with residents, ranging from young families to retirees, who have rapidly changing needs. And, the city is focused on meeting the demands of that growing and diverse population. The challenge, as always, is doing so without losing the historic charm and identity that gives New Braunfels its irresistible character.

The city's park and recreation department welcomes people of all ages, skill levels and abilities through a variety of

services and programs. As many park and recreation professionals know, an emphasis on such positive activities can result

in better academic performance, lower teen-pregnancy rates, reduced juvenile crime and improved mental health.

An example of New Braunfels' efforts to serve a broad user base is the 9,000-square-foot Westside Community Center, which the city acquired and, in 2011, opened in a previously underserved and economically disadvantaged neighborhood. A former church, the facility features a gymnasium, classrooms, a kitchen and a branch of the public library, and it hosts several year-round park and recreation and library programs. Fundraising also is under way for development of an accessible playground in the city, with assistance from the St. Charles, Mis-



New sidewalks connect Landa Park, the 51-acre crown jewel in the New Braunfels city park system, to the new recreation center.

Airborne Aerial Photography



souri-based Unlimited Play, a nonprofit leader in all-inclusive play facilities.

Over the years, parks officials have also renovated several older parks, while finding ways to preserve their history and spotlight the city's heritage. One example of this is the annual living history event, Soul Searching, Night Ramblings in the Comal Cemetery. Established in 1868, the Comal Cemetery is the burial ground for some of New Braunfels' founders and notable citizens. The annual sell-out tour is

Architectural renderings (above and center) offer interior and exterior views of the new Westside Community Center. The floor plan, at right, shows its layout.





Built in the 1900s, the Landa Park Aquatic Center features this natural pool, fed by Comal Springs, which is one of the oldest, most historic pools in Texas.

a unique, educational event that, through volunteer actor portrayals of these early residents, passes down the city's history.

This focus on New Braunfels' changing population base helped spearhead the successful passage of an \$86 million bond package in 2013 that included \$20 million for parks projects. Administrators viewed passage of the referendum as a vote of confidence in the New Braunfels Parks and Recreation Department. The agency's decades-long efforts to build a level of trust with the community will now result in the largest construction project the city has ever undertaken: a new community recreation center that will shine a spotlight on one of NRPA's three pillars — Social Equity.

Social equity plays a significant and effective role in the way association members can positively impact the communities they serve. And this New Braunfels facility, slated to open in summer 2018, will stand as a shining example of social equity at work. NRPA believes that "universal access to public parks and recreation [is] a right, not just a privilege."

### Serving an Entire City

The \$23.5 million center seeks to impact all constituents in the city — even those previously not fully served by the park and recreation department. To ensure its benefits

reach the entire community, city leaders held public meetings and interviewed representatives from numerous stakeholder groups (including the local YMCA, school district, senior center and other entities) to help determine what should be included in the new facility.

The goal is to make the 74,000-square-foot facility a model — in terms of amenities, scale and scope — for other South Texas cities to follow.

The center, designed by Dallas-based Brinkley Sargent Wiginton (BSW) Architects, will provide health and wellness programming, as well as year-round swimming and learn-to-swim opportunities. With two major rivers and a reputation for some of the best tubing in the country, swimming is a vital life skill for residents of this community. In addition, two full-size gymnasiums will provide more youth sports options, another key amenity as more select and elite teams develop in the area.

Unfortunately, not all youths in New Braunfels are skilled enough or can afford to participate on those select and elite teams, which already has created divisions in neighborhoods and schools. For example, more than 150 girls recently tried out for 50 spots on volleyball teams at one local middle school. Almost every player chosen for those

teams also played club volleyball or was a member of other select teams, which gave them huge advantages over girls who don't participate on such teams.

With the new facility, young athletes who don't make school teams can join the city's recreation leagues and enjoy new opportunities to play. Plans also are in the works to offer scholarships to kids whose families are unable to afford facility membership or program fees. The facility will also boast an 8,000-square-foot fitness area that will serve all ages and allow the city, for the first time, to provide senior-focused fitness programming.

### Make It Bigger!

Following the presentation to the public of the new recreation facility's initial design, city officials found themselves in the unlikely, but enviable, position of figuring out how to make the facility even larger, rather than determining how to scale it back (as so often happens in a hot construction market). Plans originally called for a 50,000- to 60,000-square-foot facility with one indoor recreation pool. But, forward-thinking city council members proposed the addition of a second eight-lane, 25-yard competition pool.

New Braunfels Independent School District officials understood the valuable proposition of adding the second pool, which would provide more space for the high school swim team to practice and compete. As a result, the school district contributed \$2.2 million in return for use of the competition pool for the New Braunfels High School Unicorn swim team for the next 20 years. The high school team will be able to host dual and triple meets on location, as well, with bleacher seating for up to 240 spectators.

The New Braunfels Industrial Development Corporation, an economic development taxing entity that is a huge supporter of local quality-of-life initiatives, also contributed \$5.8 million to the project — helping fund not only the competition pool but also a second

gymnasium, and reinforcing the city's longstanding commitment to community sports, recreation and wellness. The facility broke ground in October 2016 and, along with two gyms and a two-pool natatorium, will boast an elevated walking track, multiple workout spaces and classrooms, two birthday party rooms (one of them another late addition) and several other amenities.

For recreation professionals seeking to provide social equity, one of the biggest challenges in their work is establishing financial self-sufficiency. To that end, the city and BSW engaged St. Louis-based Councilman-Hunsaker early in the planning and design process to develop a dynamic business model that would provide membership fee/cost recovery options.

The team analyzed community needs, capital costs and operational expenses through a public process involving many stakeholders. Design options, along with their consequential operational models, were subsequently developed and reviewed until a project scope with a clear cost-recovery goal was agreed upon. After significant discussion, the New Braunfels City Council approved a fee schedule that projected a cost recovery of 85 percent. Then, about midway through the design phase, city officials revisited the topic to incorporate the new additions cited above. As the project ultimately grew in scope and funding, the operational model was updated and now boasts a projected cost recovery of 90 percent — higher than most other public recreation facilities of comparable size and programming.

### Social Equity at Work

The new facility will be located on Landa Street, a major thoroughfare in the community, not far from a new city hall building. It will act as a redevelopment catalyst for city-owned land, left mostly vacant for years after a Handy Andy Supermarket and strip mall burned down. The addition of the recreation center is expected to increase traffic in the area, making nearby

commercial property more valuable and attractive to developers.

With assistance from the Alamo Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, new sidewalks have been constructed along Landa Street that connect the Walnut Avenue pedestrian trail to the site of the new recreation facility and to Landa Park and beyond. Landa Park, at 51 acres, is the crown jewel in the city's park system and incorporates the William and Dolores Schumann Arboretum and Panther Canyon Nature Trail.

By converting this section of New Braunfels into a recreation gateway, officials are sending a message to all city residents that everybody not only deserves such opportunities but also needs them to achieve a more balanced lifestyle.

It's tough to argue that New Braunfels didn't need a recreation reboot. Although the city operates a thriving outdoor aquatic complex with an Olympic-size

competition pool, spring-fed recreation pool and zero-depth-entry children's pool, the existing recreation center needs some updating to better serve residents. It is housed inside a former warehouse that was built in the late 19th century, and its shortcomings include the lack of a regulation-size gymnasium and no access to the upstairs for people with disabilities — thus limiting not only programming options but also who can participate in those programs.

With this new facility, all of that is about to change and it is expected to spur redevelopment in the area, helping New Braunfels to maintain its position as a fast-evolving, action-oriented and socially responsible community. 🌿

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