

City Should Study Kids' Needs Before Establishing Center

Strange how we get intimidated about speaking out. We hear things and say "that's not right," but we block our minds to it and go on about our business.

Many times I hear such and such is coming up on the aldermanic agenda in Burlington. I tell myself I should go to the meeting and say something, but if I have a negative reaction it's harder for me to speak than if my reaction is positive.

Such was the case when I heard Alderman Diane Gallagher was going to propose that \$29,000 be spent to open a youth community center in Memorial Auditorium. For children from 10 to 18, it would be open from 2 to 10 p.m.

Thoughts flashed through my mind like lightning. The mayor has started an after-school program in the schools in the last two years...The mayor established neighborhood planning assemblies to discuss the needs of the individual wards in the city...Ward Two has the Burlington Boys Club...Ward Three has the Old North End Community Center as well as Sara Holbrook Community Center...Add to that the fact the library has an after-school and weekend program and the Church Street Center has after-school courses for kids...Plus the programs at the YMCA...Ward Six (Gallagher's ward) has the King Street Area Youth Center...What does that leave?...Wards One, Four, and Five with no center for youth activities.

Ward Four is the largest bedroom community in the city and has three elementary schools and one junior high school. It has kids, lots of them. And, Appletree Point Development underway will add to the number.

If the city wants to serve the needs of the young and give them "quality" supervised recreation, why not put up a recreation hall in Leddy Park so the kids don't have to find a place to hang out and then be chastised for doing so. (The aldermen just closed the arcade in Ethan Allen Shopping Center.)

Did the neighborhood planning assemblies indicate this was a top priority with them? Did the assemblies perceive Memorial Auditorium as the central place in the city that the majority of the kids with no recreation could get to? (Memorial Auditorium is in Ward Three, also.)

Every year this community raises millions of private dollars through payroll deduction to support 37 United Way Agencies. Those dollars are very carefully allocated by community people. Each agency must show it is providing a needed service and that it is not duplicating what is already being provided in the community.

It seems to me that before Gallagher put her proposal on the agenda, she would have done a needs assessment, and that before



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the rest of the board voted on it they would have requested further study. That study should have been done either through the neighborhood planning assemblies or through the public and private agencies already serving youth in Burlington.

Youth should be served in their own neighborhoods as close to their homes as possible for their safety and for their parents' peace of mind as well as for a feeling of neighborhood. Take the money and open neighborhood centers. The schools already exist, use them after hours under the auspices of the Parks and Recreation Department.

If you make Memorial Auditorium a hangout for kids you are going to put pressure on parents who don't want their kids out of their neighborhoods. You are going to bring more kids downtown who might not have been there otherwise.

Wouldn't those kids be better served in their own neighborhoods with their own friends and peer groups? Wouldn't the families be less concerned if they knew the kids were over at the school, rather than downtown?

One of these days I am going to have to conquer my fear of speaking out negatively on an issue when I feel so positively about it. Until then I can only hope that people in this community will speak up and let their elected representatives know when they feel something isn't needed. It isn't necessarily negative to say no if you offer an alternative.

My alternative is, let's all look into this matter and decide what youths of the city need. And, let's include the young people too. Let them tell us what their needs are and where they would like to have those needs met — central city or in their own neighborhoods?

After we've done all of this we may find a better solution to the problem (if one truly exists). We may find out that \$29,000 is just a drop in the bucket and won't begin to answer the needs.

Our elected officials should ask for our opinions. They should find out where the largest numbers of kids are without services and then give them a break. They should vote on an issue after finding out what the community needs rather than before.

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