

# KEY FINDINGS: 2019 BATAVIA PARK DISTRICT COMMUNITY LISTENING TOUR

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*aQity Research & Insights*

*Evanston, IL*

## Research Methods

- These findings are based on a series of six listening and discussion sessions with Batavia residents, sponsored by the Batavia Park District (BPD). Jeff Andreasen from aQity Research moderated the discussions, with additional questions from BPD staff and Board members who attended.
- The meetings were held between May 15<sup>th</sup> and June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019, in six different locations and on various days and times (to offer multiple options for residents to attend):
  - Wednesday, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 7PM at HC Storm Elementary School;
  - Wednesday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 7PM at Rotolo Middle School;
  - Thursday, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 7PM at JB Nelson Elementary School;
  - Monday, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 7PM at Hoover Wood Elementary School;
  - Saturday, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 10AM at the Batavia Public Library;
  - Saturday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 10AM at the Batavia Park District offices.
- The BPD promoted the listening tours and encouraged attendance through multiple channels beginning in early May. These efforts continued through the listening tour schedule, and included:
  - Banners and signage at key locations throughout Batavia, including two BPD marquee signs;
  - Press releases to local media;
  - Social media posts and boosted posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram;
  - Information and dates on the BPD website and homepage banner;
  - Postings on local calendar events sites, and on lobby TVs in community centers;
  - Feature notice in the BPD's June E-newsletter;
  - Communications to marketing contacts at multiple Batavia organizations.

## Research Methods (cont'd)

- Sixteen residents attended these sessions. They represent a wide range of residents and perspectives in terms of:
  - Age: The youngest attendees including a 5<sup>th</sup> grader and a college student. The oldest attendee is a senior who has children and grandchildren also living in Batavia.
  - Length of residence: Some moved to Batavia as recently as 6 to 8 years ago; others have lived here 25+ years.
  - Engagement with the BPD: Many have younger or teenage children who are currently active in BPD programs or use its facilities. Others are empty nesters or have children in their late teens or early 20s still at home who no longer or seldom use BPD parks or programs. A few adults are (or have been) coaches in youth sports programs sponsored by the BPD or other local organizations (e.g., Batavia Youth Baseball, Batavia Youth Football, Tri-Cities Soccer, etc.).
- Each discussion was about 2 to 2 ½ hours long. While the conversations were not recorded, extensive notes were taken by aQity and BPD staff.
  - Note that in this report, any references to the number of attendees who offered an opinion or a topic reflect the number who mentioned it on their own. Others may have agreed with the points stated by others but did not always articulate this agreement in the discussion (and therefore are not be reflected in the reported counts).
- Each meeting began by inviting attendees to offer any topics, issues, concerns, or needs that they wanted to share with the Park District. BPD staff and up to two board members were present to help answer any questions as needed.

## Research Methods (cont'd)

- After the opening discussions with attendees, some high level summary points were shared with attendees regarding:
  - The range and scope of everything that the BPD offers to the community in terms of the number of programs, facilities, trail mileage and park acreage, volunteer hours, people served annually, specific facilities, number of BPD events per year, etc.
  - Key findings from the 2017 Community Survey of Batavia residents that aQity conducted for the BPD, focusing on the open-ended feedback regarding the likes and dislikes/improvement opportunities associated with the BPD, and a needs or “gap” analysis for specific indoor and outdoor facilities.
  - Questions and follow-up discussions were then encouraged from these summaries.

## Key Findings: New Indoor Facilities Dominated the Discussions

- Each discussion began by asking attendees to share any issues, concerns, needs, or feedback regarding the Batavia Park District.
- Without any prompting by aQity or BPD staff, most (at least 12 of the sixteen residents) volunteered the need for an indoor recreational facility in Batavia.
  - A few expressed disappointment that previous referendum for an indoor facility was not successful. At least two attribute that loss to poor timing immediately after the Great Recession and the drop in home values, and/or that the price tag being too high.
- In four of the six groups, people expressed a sense that now is an opportune time to try again, given that the community has changed with Batavia attracting more younger families in recent years. As a result, they feel that the need for indoor facilities is even greater than before.

## New Indoor Facilities Dominated the Discussions (cont'd)

- Multiple benefits and reasons were expressed for wanting an indoor facility including:
  - **Proximity and Convenience:** Many residents report driving to use recreational facilities in other towns, most often:
    - Sunset Pool in Geneva;
    - Vaughn Center in Fox Valley/Aurora;
    - Delnor Health & Fitness Center in St. Charles, especially the pool;
    - Athletic Recreation Center in Woodridge;
    - Fitness facility at Fox Valley Ice Arena;
    - Fort Hill Activity Center in Naperville.

Having something in-town would free up schedules and would reduce driving time and expense. If it were local, residents could also walk or ride bikes to the facility (instead of adding to traffic congestion).

- **Economic Opportunity:** A rec facility in Batavia would keep residents' program and fitness dollars "in town", as opposed to spending that money at facilities in other communities (often at higher non-resident rates).
- **Benefit to All Residents:** Many recognize that a new facility would be good for all local residents (including non-BPD users) in that it would draw people to the community, making Batavia a more attractive place to visit and live. As a result, property values would likely improve.
  - Ensuring that the facility offers programs and amenities for all age groups, lifestyles, interests, etc. will mean it has something for everyone. Ideally it would be not just a fitness or recreation center but also a social "hub" in the community where people can interact, connect, and socialize.
- **Address Changing Community Trends/Needs:** As stated, a number of attendees feel that Batavia has become younger (more families and children) in the past several years. A new facility would address their needs for activities, recreation, programs, and fitness, and more likely keep them in the community.

## Specific Amenities for New Indoor Facility

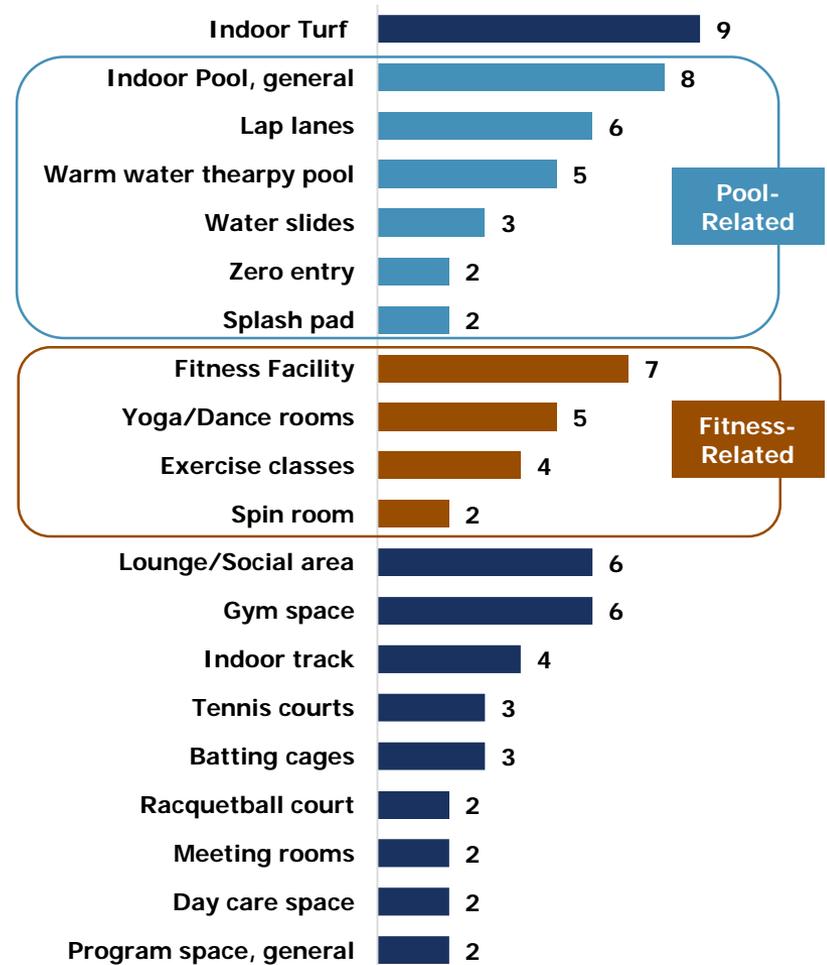
➤ The most frequently volunteered features for a new indoor facility focused on:

- **Indoor turf**, especially something that is flexible and multi-purpose (e.g., can be used for soccer, football, baseball training, Lacrosse, etc.). A 5<sup>th</sup> grader said it would be a popular space for birthday parties.
- **Indoor water**, primarily an open pool for recreation and swim lessons (a priority for some). A few seek specific features (e.g., slides, splash pad, zero entry, varied depths, etc.).

Nearly as many want lap lanes, and/or a warm water pool (which would be attractive to and used by older residents).

- **Fitness facility** (weights, machines), which would include program space for fitness classes, yoga and/or dance studios, spin rooms, etc.
- **Lounge area for socializing** (see next page for details).
- **Indoor open gyms**, which is especially important to those who have children. It would address a clear need as some expressed a lack of open and available gym space/times in the community. It could likewise be flexible for a number of activities (basketball, volleyball, pickleball, etc.), and could incorporate an elevated **indoor track** (another feature for all age groups).

### Top Indoor Rec Facilities Expressed



## Including a Social Element to a New Indoor Facility

- The idea of a lounge or social gathering spot was volunteered by one or two attendees at one of the initial discussions; it was introduced as a topic to the later groups for reactions and discussions. Each time, this concept generated a great deal of interest and several ideas.
- At the very least, residents envision a place where people could meet and interact. It could be a lounge area where parents could socialize while waiting for their children, or offer a quiet space where one could work on a laptop, read, etc.
- Others would like it to include a snack/beverage bar (especially with healthy food and drink options), with places to sit and eat (and again, socialize). A few might be interested in a broader menu (still casual) offering full meals.
- Many suggested making this an evening or weekend social destination for adults by including a bar (feasible with the BPD's liquor license). The facility could then be used for events and programs offered by the BPD or in partnership with other groups/businesses in the community (e.g., wine tastings and/or food pairings; craft beers and brewing, etc.).
- Other suggestions for this as a social destination included:
  - Game nights (bridge, bingo, trivia teams, etc.), though gambling or "casino"-type gaming was discouraged (not appropriate for the BPD or the "family-image" they associate with the facility or the community);
  - Live entertainment opportunities, serving as a small and available venue for local musicians, including adult and child music students, for live performance and recital experience;
  - Guest speakers and/or demonstrations;
  - Evening and weekend youth events (music, game nights, family activities), without alcohol service.
- A few envision this facility becoming a center for learning about and participating in a wide range of activities in the community. For example, those attending fitness facilities and programs would be able to learn about social events and activities taking place at this location, and vice-versa.

## Indoor Water and Hall Quarry Beach

- Most of those interested in some type of indoor pool clearly seek an alternative to The Quarry Beach.
- Many report continued family use of The Quarry Beach; others tend to seek alternatives. Both groups express some dislikes about The Quarry Beach, specifically:
  - The soft (“mucky”) bottom (feels dirty, gritty, difficult to clean off thoroughly);
  - Lack of water clarity (a safety concern when small children go underwater and cannot be seen);
  - The cold water temperature.

While most appreciate the uniqueness of The Quarry and some of its specific features (e.g., the drop slide), many now go elsewhere for swimming and/or swimming lessons, usually Sunset Pool in Geneva (for outdoor), and either the Vaughn Center at Fox Valley or Delnor in St. Charles (for indoor).

- These residents clearly want an indoor pool alternative in town that offers year-round swimming, cleaner water, and a greater sense of safety for small children. As reported, an open recreational pool is sought most often, followed closely by lap lanes and a warm water therapy component.
- In addition to being widely used by Batavia residents, a few also recognize that the BPD could make it available and offer indoor pool usage to other community groups (high school swim team, private swim clubs, etc.). This would then become a source of facility rental income (and again, draw more people into the facility and expose them to the other activities and amenities being offered).

## Indoor Fitness and Pool: One Facility or Two?

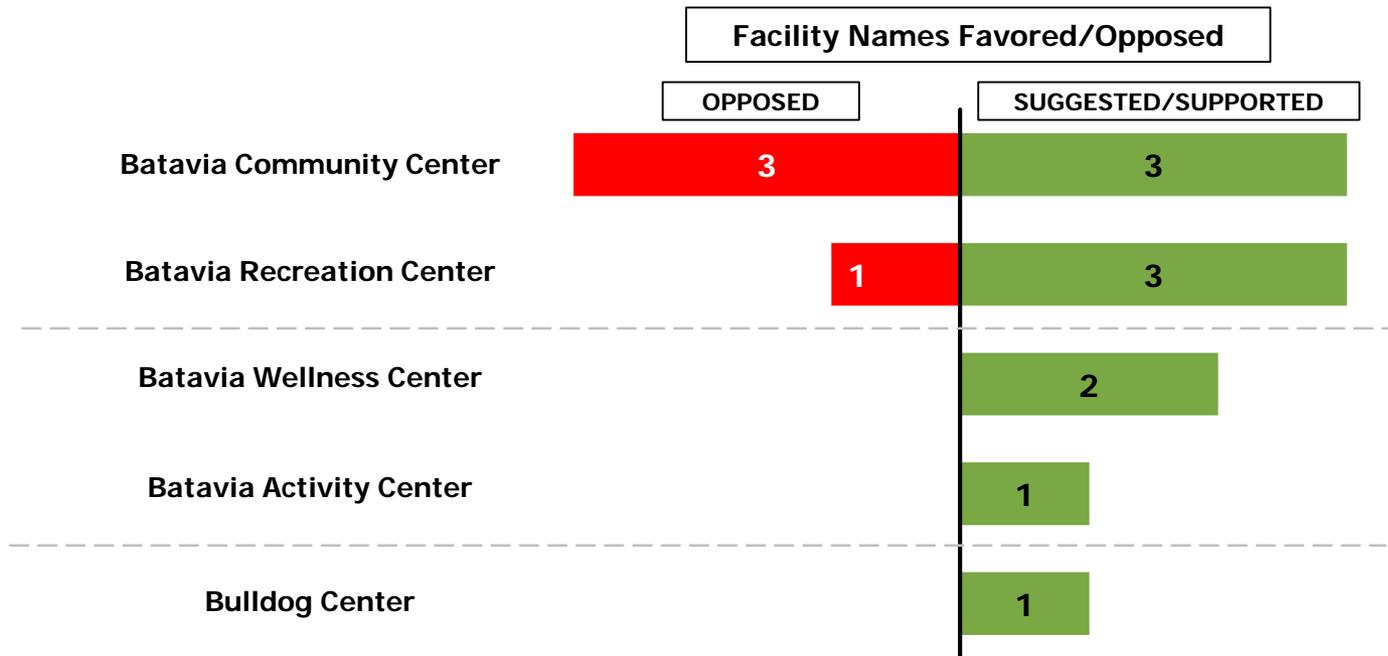
- The initial discussion focused on one facility that incorporated fitness, athletics, and indoor pool elements described earlier.
  - In the second session, a resident offered the idea of two locations (if the cost is not excessive) by incorporating the pool elements into a separate facility.
- This idea of one location vs. two (an indoor pool/aquatics facility vs. a fitness/sports/programming/social center) was tested in subsequent groups.
- Many see the appeal of having two facilities, especially if the indoor aquatic elements can be incorporated at The Hall Quarry Beach location. This would give pool users an option in the summer, and users could move back and forth between indoor and outdoor water.
  - A few, however, strongly feel that if a new indoor pool is built at this location that the overall look and “feel” of The Quarry would not be compromised. They want the uniqueness of The Quarry experience to be maintained as much as possible.

## Facility Location Preferences

- Aside from many who support a separate indoor aquatics center located at The Hall Quarry Beach site, few residents offered specific suggestions for where they would like one or two new recreational facilities located.
- Several would like to see something built on the Siemens property, but were then told about the environmental issues with that location, the current zoning, and the City's desire for that property to be a continued source of property tax revenue.
- One attendee suggested the Mooseheart property near Batavia High School, if that could be acquired.
- Otherwise, attendees felt that virtually any feasible location in Batavia would be fine, as that it would not take residents in any part of town very long to get to a location elsewhere in the city. Most agree that it should be built on existing BPD property to reduce the overall cost.
- The only other specific suggestions are that any new location is ideally:
  - Close to existing trails, allowing users to walk or jog to the facility, or safely ride their bikes to the new location (especially children);
  - Not located in or too close to the downtown business district, as it would only add to traffic and parking issues.

## A variety of potential names for a new facility were suggested, but no clear consensus emerged.

- Only some of the discussions solicited possible naming ideas for the facility; others (like “Wellness Center” and “Activity Center”) were offered in later groups and therefore not tested during earlier discussions.
- The few negative reactions to “Community Center” are that it is too “generic”, does not evoke recreation or fitness clearly enough and/or may be confused with Eastside Community Center. Still, one person preferred Community Center because they see the facility as offering more than just fitness or recreation.
- When asked to describe the city’s “brand” or image (as a potential tie-in to the name), a general consensus formed around terms of a strong sense of community and being united (“we’re all bulldogs here”); small town (but not too small), home town, charm, quiet/tranquil, outdoorsy/river town.



NOTE: The n's reported above reflect the number of attendees who suggested or verbalized a response to these potential names. Others may have agreed but did not articulate/were not counted.

## Strongest Pro-Facility Arguments

- It is important to note that while the Listening Tour was publicized via multiple channels prior to and during the meeting sessions, no attendees expressed opposition to a new community recreational or fitness/pool facility. While a few are concerned about the cost, everyone agreed that the community would benefit from this opportunity.
- Those who did attend recall that the cost and timing of the previous rec center referendum were the primary reasons for its defeat. While economic issues have improved since then, a few attendees recognize that some in the community will still oppose a property tax referendum.
  - The senior resident (who has lived in Batavia for over sixty years) is aware that many other seniors in Batavia are simply not interested in a new facility, and would be opposed due to higher taxes.
- A number of attendees feel it is important that any new facility delivers quality but is practical, economical, and not opulent.
  - For example, some features such as a sauna and/or a steam room are seen as “nice to have”, but not necessary.
  - As one attendee said, “Don’t oversell or overhype this by making it a palace. Keep it low key”.
- At some of the discussions, it was suggested to attendees that the argument of a new facility helping to increase everyone’s property values may work against the initiative, in that anti-tax residents would see higher property assessments translating into even higher property taxes. Upon considering this, attendees were quick to respond that by helping to make Batavia more attractive as a destination and new residents:
  - Local businesses would benefit (as people are likely to shop and/or eat as they go to and from the facility);
  - It could therefore bring in better and more stable businesses to the community, adding to the tax base (and reducing the burden on residents);
  - Better property values mean it will be easier for people who might want to downsize and still be able to afford to live in the community.

## Strongest Pro-Facility Arguments (cont'd)

- Others feel that a new recreational or community facility will provide all young people with easy access to participate in fitness and sports activities, including those who are not as interested, committed, or athletically gifted to be selected by more competitive travel teams, tournament groups, or sports leagues (which are abundantly available in the community).
  - Some just want to play basketball, baseball, soccer, etc. with their friends to have fun. A BPD facility would offer options and programs that are more inclusive to all.
- In addition, a facility would improve “health equity” in the community, meaning that access to fitness programs and facilities through the BPD would be affordable to everyone, not just those who can afford a private fitness option or non-resident fees elsewhere.
  - These insights arose during discussions of whether a new BPD fitness/pool facility would be competing with private fitness providers in the community (e.g., health clubs, yoga/specialty studios, etc.).
  - Attendees clearly feel that a BPD fitness facility would introduce a solution for those unable to pay private memberships or program fees. Many feel that existing fitness clubs and studios would be able to stay in business.
  - A new BPD facility would represent “entry point to a healthy lifestyle”
- In summary, virtually all attendees agree that a new BPD facility would (and must) offer something for all ages and lifestyles in the community -- physical and fitness activities, social interactions, cultural events, and learning opportunities.

## Other Topics/Opportunities for the BPD

- In addition to requests and comments offered regarding indoor water and recreational facilities, some residents offered other suggestions as part of these discussions. These include:
  - Added/More after school programs for children, akin to “Kids’ Club”;
  - Added/More options for day care;
  - Grooming outdoor trails for cross-country skiing;
  - Road trips for active adults;
  - Offering life coaching programs and courses (e.g., mental health issues, meditation);
  - Providing free electric car charging stations at some of the more widely-used BPD locations (e.g., Hall Quarry Beach, Big Woods, Engstrom Park);
  - Working with the City to extend sidewalks to and/or around/near Woodland Hills Park (due to child safety concerns from an upcoming construction project and lack of safe walking routes in that area);
  - Working with the BPD to promote a new sport called Kubb, and offering a demo at an upcoming event (like the Windmill City Fest) along with a potential future tournament opportunity;
  - Accessibility issues, specifically more ADA-accessible porta-potties at the Windmill City Festival;
  - Providing more recycling containers along the Riverwalk, and making them more prominent.