



TOP 5 REASONS WHY YOUR COMMUNITY SHOULD CONSIDER SHARED FACILITIES

The Top 5 Reasons Why Your Community Should Consider Merging Your Facilities and How to Approach a Shared Facility Project

Communities are built through connections between people. Running into neighbors at the grocery store, sharing a commute, or getting to know the regulars at coffee shops, dog parks, and libraries, creates shared bonds between residents and enhances our well-being.

Communities and local governments are increasingly seeking to create these conditions of serendipity and overlap, as well as resource and programming efficiencies, through developing shared or merged facilities. By bringing together multiple departments into one building, and multiple programs on one site, a single facility can generate and support these valuable connections and make services more accessible to the wider community.

The Top 5 Benefits you can expect from a multi-use facility are:

1 MAXIMIZED REAL ESTATE ASSETS AND REDUCED DEVELOPMENT COSTS

Cities can find significant savings through co-locating programs, since they are not duplicating (or triplicating) costs associated with permitting, utilities, access, and mobilization. Additionally, developing a single site more densely can provide flexibility relative to phasing and temporary facilities needs, since only a single site will be impacted during construction.

2 DON'T TRY TO OUTSMART THE CODE.

Rather than quick drop-offs (of kids, books, paperwork), shared facilities provide a range of potential activities, and can encourage extended engagement and time on-site. Parents might drop off a child at camp, and then use a library workroom for a remote meeting. This can also benefit circulation and congestion, as users arrive and depart within a wider window of time.

3 IMPROVED SPACE UTILIZATION

Since different programs have different peak hours, combined facilities can remain active throughout the day week/year. For example, lap swimmers may arrive at 6am every weekday, while event rooms see the greatest demand on weekend evenings. Shared spaces within these facilities are less likely to sit empty since they serve varied uses. Increased activity throughout the day can also provide an overall benefit to the surrounding area with regards to safety.

4 MORE USERS FROM ACROSS THE COMMUNITY

Sharing a space can make diverse programs visible to those that might not otherwise know about them—seeing a class in an adjacent room or walking by an activity can inspire new engagement in existing programs.

5 INCREASED ACCESS AND FLEXIBILITY

People are more likely to engage with programs that are in the spaces of their daily life—schools, parks, neighborhoods, community centers or gyms. This strategy escalated during the pandemic, libraries and schools became de-facto public health clinics, dispensaries of vaccines, school lunches, and information. In crisis, governments saw value in bringing critical services to spaces that were more immediately accessible to residents. As we are developing a new generation of public spaces, this co-location allows cities and governments to capitalize on proximity and make their service distribution more effective.

However, with these benefits come challenges—it's obviously not as simple as declaring that the pool and library will now share space. Multi-programmed spaces require a thoughtful approach to early programming and design to ensure that the capital investments for these facilities truly provide communities with results.

For programs with specialized requirements (aquatics, some healthcare functions, etc.) pivoting to a shared facility model often requires new construction, as it may not be feasible to renovate or reconfigure existing construction. It's doubly important for early planning efforts to identify key usage criteria and requirements for a new building.

In considering a shared facility approach, we see the most questions (and negotiation) around access. City programs span the full spectrum of approaches to public access—from libraries, which typically seek to maximize openness and public accessibility, to swimming pools, which require clear boundaries for public safety, to multipurpose spaces which may depend on staff control to manage public access for events, to civic offices, which functionally require privacy and separation.

Co-locating programs with similar levels of access—such as libraries and recreation facilities, can allow for a more fluid relationship between program spaces since they can share primary points of access and circulation.

However, when access requirements differ between programs, it can be useful to delineate distinct zones with separate access areas that can be controlled and monitored separately. Consider that the hours of operation, particularly with relation to staffing, can play a role in defining zones within a facility.

Areas that require staff supervision should be able to be closed off from more public spaces that might remain open longer or during times when the building is not staffed. If there is a shared lobby/reception, consider the approach to staffing—the public may assume that staff at a reception desk can answer all inquiries, while departments may in fact be used to operating independently. Shared facilities work best when the co-locating departments have a strong working relationship and existing relationships that can be translated to physical space.

While many of the benefits to shared facilities accrue largely based on proximity, these facilities can also facilitate more integrated space sharing. Multipurpose spaces—whether they're called classrooms, conference rooms, or studio spaces—are found in almost all public buildings. In a shared facility, this type of room becomes a shared resource for multiple programs. Identifying areas of programmatic overlap can allow cities to right-size the facilities to meet multiple programmatic needs without overbuilding.

To ensure that these spaces are truly multifunctional, durability and flexibility are key. From movable partitions that allow subdivision of larger rooms, to durable flooring that can hold up to both dance classes and preschool, maximizing the use of these important rooms is a critical component. A shared room scheduling system (which can be tied to a building keying or security system) is often required to manage these spaces across departments.

With careful long-range planning and an experienced team, designing community buildings to accommodate multiple programs in a single facility can be an effective way both to improve efficiency and build a stronger sense of community.