

Gym Seen As Key Feature To Community Center In Orleans

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By: Ryan Bray



Members of the community center feasibility task force in Orleans discuss options for a new community center during their June 23 virtual meeting. A gym has been identified as one of the pivotal features of a new building. RYAN BRAY PHOTO

ORLEANS — A community center could include any number of different features and programming. But members of the town's community center feasibility task force are adamant about the need for a future building to house one thing in particular.

The Lower Cape sorely needs a gym, members said at their June 23 meeting, and any plan for a community center in town should include one.

Apart from Nauset Regional Middle School, where demand for gym space is high, the closest available public gym is at the Harwich Community Center, committee member Tracy Murphy noted. But demand is such that some schools and organizations have had to cancel their programming because space there wasn't available.

"I think if you had a gym, it would fill up very quickly and in more ways than we could possibly anticipate," she said.

The committee has ramped up talk of late as to what a new community center might look like and what it might include. Discussion of a center comes as the Snow Library Board of Trustees are also exploring building a new library at the existing Main Street location. The two boards met last month to iron out what programs and services might be accommodated between the new buildings.

A new center is likely to focus more on active programs and uses. David Eisen of the engineering firm Abacus presented six preliminary concepts for the committee's consideration June 23. The committee looked at sketches for small, medium and large community center designs, each with and without space for a new senior center.

Each model included numerous multipurpose programming rooms with the flexibility to be expanded and merged together as needed. The models also included space for art programs, office space and a lobby that could accommodate features such as a cafe and a children's play area. Focus was also placed on integrating indoor and outdoor space.

But only the larger model minus a new senior center included a gym, which Committee Chair Fritz Luft said represents "a gap in what's available now" in Orleans.

"For working people who want to come home from work and play a pick-up basketball game, there's no room for that right now," Luft said when reached by phone following the meeting. "Right now, our gyms in the evening are booked until eight at night."

The committee recently received the results of an online survey that asked residents and visitors what they want to see in a new center, and Luft said the results clearly showed interest in a gym being included as part of the planning. He said 75 percent of respondents between the ages of 25 and 45 want a gym. For residents 65 and older that number fell to 40 percent.

"That's still not a bad number for older folks," he said.

Ideally, Luft said, the gym will be flexible in use to accommodate not only sports such as basketball and pickleball, but also plays and other community events.

Members expressed interest in a hybrid model, perhaps one that merges a smaller community center with a gym while also including space where a new senior center might be built in the future.

A gym is a "cornerstone" feature for families, argued committee member Jamie Balliett. But he also said the committee should err on the side of building smaller rather than building something too big.

"Let's not go too big, and realize that people are going to be turned away by that," he said.

"I think it's going to be very tricky for us to plan this given our limitations regarding site and parking and whatnot in conjunction with the [council on aging]," said Alice Thomason Van Oot.

The committee's conversation June 23 mirrored one had by the select board the week prior about the limited amount of space in town that can be dedicated to future projects. Committee member Andrea Reed, who also chairs the select board, suggested that some multipurpose rooms could be designated for yoga classes and other specific uses, which would free up more room for other programming that might need a gym.

The large model presented to the committee called for a 32,000-square-foot building. That could be reduced down to 26,000 square feet to accommodate a gym, Eisen said.

Luft said members will be presented at their next meeting with three new models for them to consider down from the original six, this time with proper architectural renderings.

"All of them, even the smallest, will have a gym," he said. "That's the cornerstone of any community center that we're looking at."

The committee expects to receive a report from Eisen with options and recommendations as to how to proceed with a new building this fall.

Originally the committee had hoped to go before voters at town meeting in October to request money for project design, but Luft said that more likely will be timed for next spring.

"We think it's much more important to get this right," he said. "We don't go through this exercise very often. We want to go in there on very firm footing."

Email Ryan Bray at ryan@capecodchronicle.com