

by Jim Randall, Executive Director of Frankfort Square Park District

Too Good To Be True



The Frankfort Square Park District (FSPD), located in unincorporated Frankfort Township in Will County, represents Will and Cook Counties and Frankfort and Rich Townships, with the Villages of Frankfort, Tinley Park, and Matteson, at a level not normally associated with park districts. Throughout its 41+ year history, intergovernmental cooperation has been a vital component to the FSPD's operation as it serves in this role. As a non-partisan entity, the FSPD continually works with all elected government representatives, regardless of party affiliation, resulting in its ability to generate cooperative support for its residents.

FSPD residents utilize the LWN field house, fitness/dance studio, cardio/weight equipment, Olympic-size swimming pool, five lighted baseball/softball fields, three soccer/football fields, synthetic surface football/soccer/track stadium, and even an indoor dog training facility that was jointly developed by LWN and the FSPD.

The benchmark for intergovernmental success is the relationship with both Lincoln-Way Community High School District 210 and Summit Hill School District 161 (SHSD) that is "too good to be true." The FSPD is comprised of 18,000+ residents that enjoy access to 85,235 square feet of indoor gym space at both school districts, highlighted by the Lincoln-Way North High School (LWN) built in 2008, which is available seven days a week. FSPD residents utilize the LWN field house, fitness/dance studio, cardio/weight equipment, Olympic-size swimming pool, five lighted baseball/softball fields, three soccer/football fields, synthetic surface football/soccer/track stadium, and even an indoor dog training facility that was jointly developed by LWN and the FSPD.

The LWN campus also includes a Performing Arts Center with professional acoustics, seating for 800, and is home to the Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra. This space is frequently used by the FSPD for preschool Christmas shows and its spring dance recital. The FSPD also promotes Lincoln-Way District 210's performing arts Senior and Children's Series programming, and provides concierge cart service to those with limited mobility that attend these events. The cultural benefits of the Performing Arts Center are made possible through support of the FSPD, providing amenities to high school and park district residents, not normally available to a small community.

Fitness opportunities are provided through the FSPD F.A.N. program or Frankfort Square Park District Activities at North. How much does this cost our residents? A family annual membership is \$100, couple \$75, single \$50, and best value is the \$10 annual membership for any senior age 65 and older, with a \$5 annual renewal fee. Better yet, all residents have free access to the field house for walking and the pool for lap swimming from 6:00 a.m.-9:30 p.m. daily, even while school is in session.

The local elementary school district, SHSD, is equally generous, providing limitless keyed access to their seven school facilities that are available anytime they are not in use by their students or programs. New developments have created the opportunity to fill an unused 30,000+ square foot facility, Mary Drew Elementary School, with the laughter of children. This former junior high facility has a full gymnasium, classrooms, dance studio, art room, and office space that is now available for FSPD programming.

All campuses and athletic fields have been jointly developed at LWN and the SHSD schools through FSPD funds and support. The school campuses double as the most-used park sites. Additionally, all athletic fields and the majority of green space is maintained by FSPD equipment and personnel.

FSPD equipment and personnel also provide winter plowing and salting of eleven SHSD parking lots and school walkways. Capital improvements the FSPD provided to SHSD school sites totals \$1,076,000, and the Park District expends in excess of \$153,000 annually in material and labor costs, per a 2011 analysis.

Intergovernmental cooperation does not stop at the school level. The FSPD also collaborates with local law enforcement agencies and municipalities to preserve the public health, safety and welfare of its residents. The Will County Sheriff's Department, through a mutual agreement, is authorized to control certain activities on FSPD-owned properties. The Tinley Park Police Department has cooperated with the FSPD on a variety of issues, including contracted service for special events and increased patrols in heavily utilized park sites.

The FSPD works jointly with the Village of Tinley Park through an agreement that allows police department parking enforcement at the District's Union Creek Park/Hilda Walker School site. A cooperative agreement by and between the Village of Tinley Park and the FSPD provides monetary reimbursement from the Village in exchange for green area maintenance and upkeep of bike/walking paths of mutually served properties located in Tinley Park within the boundaries of the FSPD.

Working jointly with the Frankfort Township Road District, the FSPD purchased a tub grinder to convert branch clippings that would have been sent to a landfill, into high-quality mulch. The mulch is used for a multitude of landscape projects by the Township and Park District, and is also available free of charge to residents, and is delivered by Township trucks for their personal landscaping needs. Immediate benefits are realized in joint annual savings of \$35,000. This cooperative effort also reduces equipment, labor, and fuel costs, while recycling waste into a beneficial product.

In a cooperative effort with the Frankfort Square Park District, the Frankfort Township trail serves as a vital link in a planned bike path system. The interconnected trail systems were both made possible through the efforts of the FSPD securing grant funding from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Illinois Bike Path Grant Program. Residents now enjoy the 9.5 mile network of trails that connect parklands and provide access and safe passage to schools and neighborhoods throughout the Frankfort Square community. The FSPD's Island Prairie greenhouse, designed to produce native plantings for the Park District's natural areas, is also utilized during the winter months to propagate lettuce crops that are donated to the



Frankfort Township Food Pantry. Annually, 100+ pounds of fresh produce fills the food pantry's shelves, providing families with healthy options during these difficult economic times. Volunteers from Lincoln-Way North High School, local church groups, and University of Illinois Extension Will County Master Gardeners, have all participated by planting, watering, harvesting, and delivering bags of lettuce to the Food Pantry.

The FSPD Board and staff hosted a round table discussion, bringing law enforcement agencies, fire departments, and local park districts together to discuss concerns that can affect growing communities. Information generated from professionals in Will County, Tinley Park, and Frankfort resulted in focused efforts to manage concerns with proactive measures.

In March, 2015, the FSPD hosted a park board workshop, designed to gather government and school district officials, local agencies, community groups and residents to provide a forum in which to share ideas and discuss relevant park district/community topics. The event was well attended, and all left with a greater appreciation of the cooperative efforts benefitting the agencies and the residents that are mutually served.

The FSPD provides services for residents with disabilities through the South Suburban Special Recreation Association (SSSRA). SSSRA is a therapeutic recreation program that is an extension of eleven park districts and three recreation and parks departments. It is organized to provide individuals with disabilities or special needs the opportunity to be involved in year round recreation programs. The park district has been a member of SSSRA since 1989.

FSPD's commitment to the special needs population was demonstrated by its exemplary leadership role in the construction of the SSSRA administrative offices, from donating park property, to providing an alternate bond funding vehicle via the sale of \$750,000 in alternate bonds, through overseeing the entire construction process. In 2005, the FSPD added elevated therapeutic gardens, a special needs playground, and dog park at this site, further enhancing recreational needs of the district's special population with tangible therapeutic values.

FSPD is ideally suited with professional staff and facilities necessary to host worthwhile events in cooperation with local, national, and international organizations. In 2013, the Chicagoland Strollathon, benefitting children suffering from Rett Syndrome, a neurological disorder, was held at FSPD's Union Creek Park. This International Rett Syndrome event raised \$75,000 in a single day for this worthy cause. The FSPD also combines health/wellness programming with fundraising efforts, by annually hosting an indoor triathlon where 100% of participation fees are donated to a non-profit community organization that provides emergency shelter/essential services to victims of domestic violence.

The cooperation of elected officials, school and park district professionals, villages, counties, and residents doesn't just happen. It all starts with a spirit of cooperation and a willingness to say yes, when no is often easier. It is proven in the FSPD's community that the concept of cooperation works, and in this time of tax caps and economic turmoil, all involved realize and appreciate the importance of working together.

The cooperative efforts have been developed and maintained by hundreds of Park Board and School Board Members throughout 41+ years of growth and change. All these resident volunteers realize the importance of cooperative efforts and the direct benefits that are provided to the residents our agencies mutually serve. The agreements are not static; they change and adapt daily to accommodate the fluid nature of our agencies and programming. The end result is that programming, facilities, and savings available to our residents is made possible through our long-standing intergovernmental cooperation.

Maximizing tax dollars by minimizing duplication of facilities and services has been a proven formula that provides residents with services and facilities that are enjoyed at little or no cost, thanks to the spirit of cooperation that truly "too good to be true".