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Meaningful Recreation for all Handicapped

by Steve Keay

The Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association, an extension of ten park districts on the north shore of Chicago—Deerfield, Glencoe, Glenview, Highland Park, Highwood, Kenilworth, Northbrook, Northfield, Wilmette, and Winnetka—continues to grow. Formed in March of 1970 to provide recreation for the handicapped (those with special NEEDS), it is now well into its fifth year of operation.



The children of the Summer Day Camp have a good time with arts and crafts.

In the beginning, we felt we were thinking big when we offered a program which had thirty participants in our pilot operation in 1969. In 1970, our first official year of operation, we doubled our enrollment to sixty. Now, in 1974, we have in excess of 530 participants, covering all areas of special needs from multiply handicapped, both physical and mental, to relatively minor speech problems, with the exception of the blind. It is our hope that this group, too, will join us by 1975 as we continue to meet newly found and expressed needs of those who are handicapped.



Outdoor play and exercise help the children develop their Motor Skills.

Because of the outstanding supportive efforts by the commissioners of the ten member districts, in conjunction with assistance and professional commitment on the part of these ten staffs, the NSSRA program offerings know no limit. To our participants, which numbered over 700 during this past year, this means ice skating, piano lessons, tennis lessons, horseback riding, bowling, and creative movement classes, to name only a few. Then there are teen clubs, young adult clubs and friendship clubs in addition to the cooking, photography and science clubs. Swimming classes for the beginner, advanced, and those interested in competing in the Special Olympics are now also a regular portion of our program. As an outgrowth of our close

relationship with the Northern Suburban Special Education District, we provide sports clubs, motor development programs, and even recreational programs for the handicapped three- and four-year-old children of our area. During the 1973-74 school term, we were able to offer and participate in forty-three programs in addition to the numerous special events offered throughout the year.

The summer operation requires a staff of nearly 200 plus the employment of thirty-five handicapped high-school-aged boys and girls who work as supportive staff in all areas of the program. The camp, which was officially named this summer, "WeCanDo," operates for six weeks from nine a.m. to three p.m. daily. During each week, the schedule includes at least two sessions of instructional swimming, three sessions of drama, art, music, crafts, and nature study. Fridays, we travel to nearby parks, zoos, museums, play miniature golf, or ice skate. Lunch and an afternoon at the beach

typically bring the campers' day to a close. Through our cooperation with NSSED, each child received a suitable classroom educational experience designed to individually better prepare him for the future.

Illinois Parks and Recreation 4 November/December, 1974

Special events are also an integral part of the summer, including visiting professional baseball and football players, recording stars, groups such as Free Street Theater and the Chicago Theater of the Deaf, to name a few. Most would agree that NSSRA is meeting the needs.

The final chapter for summer of '74 is one week at overnight camp for approximately thirty children aged eight to fourteen. While this is a small group, the benefits will be great both now and in years to come.

Recreation for the handicapped is here to stay and we of the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association are very glad.

(Editors note: Steve Keay is Executive Director of the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association.)

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The Young Adult Club has a session in Folk Dancing.

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FINAL DRAFT
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Just What Is an SRA?

Special recreation associations or "SRAs" provide invaluable services to people with physical and mental disabilities

BY JOHN N. McGOVERN, CLP

Illinois is renowned for many reasons: among them, Abraham Lincoln, The Magnificent Mile, Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, and soybeans. Particularly in park and recreation circles, Illinois is known nationwide for its unique park district system and its equally unparalleled yet often misunderstood special recreation associations.

A special recreation association or "SRA" is a partnership of two or more park districts or municipalities formed to provide recreation for adults and children with disabilities and authorized by the Park District Code. Today Illinois has 26 SRAs made up of 142 park districts and 24 municipalities.

The first SRA, Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association (NSSRA), was formed in March of 1970. Park districts located in the northern Chicago suburban park districts realized that alone, they simply could not meet the leisure needs of children with disabilities in their districts. Having carefully watched the success of the recently formed special education cooperative, the Northern Suburban Special Education District, the park districts did what many of us do: they borrowed someone else's idea.

As park districts in Deerfield, Glencoe, Glenview, Highland Park, Kenilworth, Lake Bluff, Northbrook, Northfield, Winnetka, Wilmette, and other communities began discussions in 1969, three benefits to participation in a partnership were identified. First, NSSRA would reduce duplicative supervisory costs, allowing tax dollars to go to staff who could conduct programs. This would be accomplished by eliminating the need for a supervisor in every partner agency; instead, by using a NSSRA supervisor, more re-

sources would go towards direct service staff.

Second, NSSRA would allow partner districts to serve people with a low incidence disability. The districts had already learned that if there are only four kids ages 10 to 12 with a certain disability in one district, it is hard to program for that group. But, if there are 4 in Wilmette, 7 in Glenview, 8 in Northbrook, 3 in Winnetka, 2 in Glencoe, and 7 in Highland Park, suddenly there are 31 kids ages 10 to 12 with a similar disability in a relatively close geographic area. That makes programming more likely to draw the needed minimum number of registrants.

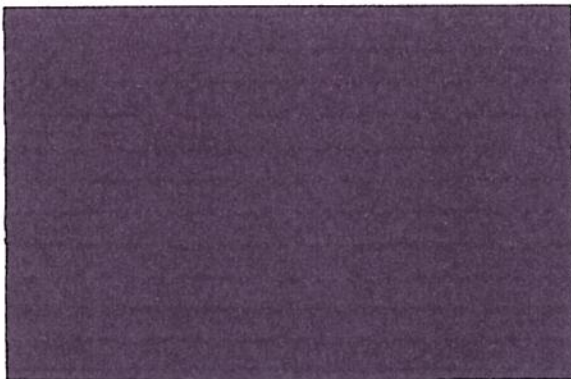
Third, NSSRA would allow access to enhanced recreation options. For example, there is not a beach in Glenview. But through the partnership, Glenview kids with disabilities would participate in programs at a beach in Wilmette or Highland Park. And, kids with disabilities in Glencoe who want indoor skating can now get it through a partnership program in Northbrook.

Despite significant changes to the SRA model, these are still the key benefits of SRA involvement 30 years later.

The SRA Today

Although there is no typical SRA, they share some common characteristics. SRAs today provide specialized recreation services such as day camps, vacation trips, Special Olympics, before- and after-school programs, social programs, and other activities for people with disabilities. SRAs also provide information about accessible facility design or adaptive equipment, again in response to community demand.

SPECIAL FOCUS



"We really do serve everybody," says Craig Culp, superintendent of recreation at the Maine-Niles Association for Special Recreation in Skokie (M-NASR), the second SRA formed, back in 1972.

Culp says M-NASR provides special services for ages 2 to 80-plus. "Our participants have physical disabilities, cognitive disabilities, sensory impairments, developmental disabilities like autism, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, cardiac conditions, and some of the so-called hidden disabilities such as diabetes and epilepsy."

A particularly valuable SRA service is transportation. Surveys of people with disabilities in Illinois confirm that the lack of accessible transportation is one of the greatest barriers to the use of public recreation services. SRAs combined provide hundreds of thousands of rides to and from programs. Many of the SRAs operate their own fleets, ranging in size from one to ten vehicles.

What Do SRAs Cost?

An SRA is an excellent example of local government cost-containment. The statutory levy maximum for funding SRA activities is 4 cents per \$100 of equalized assessed valuation (EAV). The average levy by a park district or municipality in an SRA in this fund is just under 2 cents per \$100 of EAV. As partnerships of local governments, the SRAs have adhered to the limits placed on the partners regarding property taxes.

How does this translate for the average homeowner? In Cook County, the owner of a \$200,000 home pays an average of \$6.40 in annual property taxes for the

SRA. That figure rises in the collar counties to \$13.20. Coffee for two at Starbucks is \$6.40 and a pizza costs \$13.20. Clearly, the SRA is an easily affordable cost which, when combined with the partner communities, yields a sum sufficient for a regional program.

However, costs for special recreation services could not be generated by one agency. Bob Pindar,

director of the Southeast Association for Special Parks & Recreation (SEASPAR) in Downers Grove, explains: "The Village of Indian Head Park is the smallest SEASPAR partner and contributes \$10,204 this current year. However, our total tax support this year is \$702,413, and Indian Head Park residents have access to all the things we do that are supported by the total tax revenue, not just the \$10,000 contributed by the village."

SRAs widely vary in size. Partnerships range from the 2-district agreement in Champaign and Urbana to the 17 districts participating in the Northwest Special Recreation Association (NWSRA).

According to Charlene Holtz, an attorney for several districts: "SRAs reflect the similarities and the differences of the partner park districts. The partnerships naturally seek some homogeneity. But no one knows the optimal size.

"For some, 17 seems too big. But for those 17, it must be right or they would do it differently. Two is probably too small in a congested suburban area, but it is perfect for Champaign and Urbana."

That is a key advantage to the SRA model. Like an individual buying a pair of pants, the partnership picks a size that fits.

The Special Recreation Levy

The Park District and the Municipal codes include similar provisions that allow neighboring park districts and municipalities to join together to provide recreation for people with disabilities. The statutes offer the incentive of a funding vehicle for local governments that join together: a property tax can be levied for joint

agreement purposes. Without a joint agreement, a park district cannot levy this tax.

This legislation was guided through the Illinois General Assembly in 1969 by then State Senator Harris Fawell. Now a retired member of congress, Fawell considers this one of the best pieces of legislation he has been involved with.

"Park districts wanted to serve people with disabilities and didn't have the resources to do it right," says Fawell. "The legislation we passed allowed them to do so in an efficient way, and importantly, with little burden on taxpayers.

"We did this because it was the right thing to do. It was not a response to a state or federal mandate. It was a result of a desire to something positive for Illinois residents".

John Hedges, director of the Park District of Oak Park, played a key role in convincing then Senate President Philip Rock of Oak Park to sponsor the a change in the statute in 1987.

Says Hedges: "The tax rate ceiling was \$.02 per \$100 of EAV. The Joint Legislative Committee (an advocacy committee of the Illinois Association of Park Districts and the Illinois Park and Recreation Association) found that most park districts and cities in an SRA were at their levy ceiling and were facing rising demand for service and a growing need to make recreation facilities accessible."

With the support of the Illinois Taxpayers Federation, the legislation passed the General Assembly and was signed into law by Governor James Thompson.

Park districts understand the importance of supporting recreation for people with disabilities with this levy authority.

According to Tom Richardson, director of the Glenview Park District and a member of the NSSRA board of directors for almost 20 years: "Next to park land itself, recreation programs for people with disabilities can be considered the soul of public recreation. This is the type of thing that was made for some form of tax support.

"Where better to use taxes from everyone than to help those with disabilities who don't have the same opportunities to enjoy activities which improve health and increase self esteem?"

The Effect of the Tax Cap

Enacted in 1991, the Property Tax Extension Limitation Law or "tax cap" has affected all park districts and cities, and, ultimately, their SRA functions. The tax cap effectively limits the ability of a partner to increase SRA support.

As demand for recreation services has continued to rise, unfunded federal mandates—such as the sweeping Americans with Disabilities Act—have made park districts and cities aware of other costs. One such mandate is recreation "inclusion," whereby people with disabilities participate in programs alongside people without disabilities.

Says Liza McElroy, superintendent of recreation at Winnetka Park District and president-elect of IPRA: "Inclusion requires the Winnetka Park District to provide support such as extra staff, more training for staff, sign language interpreters, adaptive equipment, accessible transportation, home visits, and other modifications so that people with disabilities can choose our programs and participate alongside people without disabilities. We rely on our SRA (NSSRA) to guide us through this part of our programs.

"NSSRA spends \$300,000 annually for inclusion in the form of wages for part- and full-time staff and materials."

Another ADA-related mandate involves "accessibility," requiring programs in existing and new recreation facilities to be accessible to people with disabilities.

"Water parks, playgrounds, golf courses, transportation trails, racquetball courts, ice rinks, and restaurants have all been reviewed for accessibility here" says Jerry Handlon, director of the Schaumburg Park District.

"We understand our obligation to make these facilities accessible. We wish there was some way to address this unfunded mandate, because we do want people with disabilities in our facilities."

Handlon illustrates this desire with an access success story involving golf, in which a father and son were able to enjoy the game of golf like everyone else because the district owns an accessible golf car.

Legislation introduced the spring 1999 session by Senator Kathy Parker addresses this problem. Senate Bill 345 excludes the

special recreation levy from the Property Tax Extension Limitation Law aggregate, freeing it up for use in projects such as inclusion and accessibility.

"The bill was stalled in the Senate Revenue Committee because the Senate was concerned that a change for park districts and cities in an SRA could have a domino effect for other similar governmental partnerships," says Larry Reiner, director of the Northeast DuPage Special Recreation Association (NEDSRA).

"Kevin Kendrigan at Northwest Special Recreation Association, John McGovern at NSSRA, I and others are working with Senators Christine Radogno, Wendell Jones, Bill Peterson, and Kathy Parker this summer to examine this issue and come up with a solution, because our preliminary research shows no other governmental partnerships that function as SRAs do."

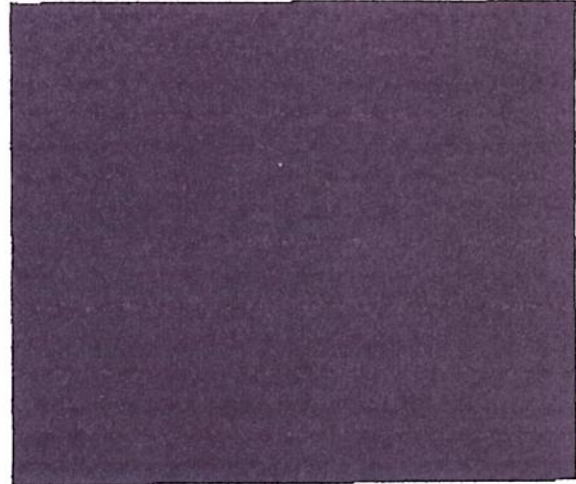
Variations to the SRA Model

"One of the great things about the SRA model is its flexibility to adapt to the community," says Chuck Balling, director of the Gurnee Park District. Balling served on the boards of traditional SRAs at SSSRA and at NEDSRA. While at the Elmhurst Park District, he was involved in contracting some special recreation services to the Ray Graham Association, a large nonprofit in DuPage County.

Says Balling: "Gateway was a way for the park district to do more inclusion in-house and privatize some of the special recreation function."

Balling admits that, like any other change from the status quo, there are advantages and disadvantages to the Gateway system. Today Balling is involved in another unique SRA. The Gurnee Park District is a partner in the Warren Special Recreation Association (WSRA).

"The Township wants to make sure all its residents with disabilities are eligible for services, since not everyone in the Township lives within a park district," says Brenda Meixelsperger, director of WSRA.



The Township contributes office space and other resources to the SRA operation, in place of the property tax support provided by its partner park districts and villages.

The SRA of Tomorrow

The SRA model will continue to evolve as park districts and municipal recreation departments address other issues that fit into the broad group of disability issues. This includes recreation programs for at-risk youth, providing services to children and adults in their homes, and serving children and adults who not only have disabilities but are medically fragile. The spread of technology and the reduced cost of access to it make it certain that computers and the web will be an integral part of SRA operations in the next three years.

As accessible design guidelines for recreation areas are completed, look for SRAs to do more training and technical assistance. Who better to ask about beach or playground access than the staff at the park district who work with people with disabilities?

The SRA model turns 30 in March of 2000. To every one who shaped this valuable public service—legislators, park district or recreation board commissioners, employees and volunteers—thanks and congratulations! ■

JOHN N. MCGOVERN, CLP
is the executive director of the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association. He is a member of the IAPD/IPRA Joint Legislative Committee and enjoys reading, writing and talking about the application of ADA to parks and recreation.

SPECIAL FOCUS

History of SRAs

Illinois leads the nation in providing specialized leisure services for people with physical and mental disabilities. Here's how it all began.

BY LARRY REINER, CLP

As in the evolution of any industry, the history behind its development is often lost or altered as the story is retold over time. This article shares excerpts from the history of special recreation associations (SRAs) that are not well-known to people in the field today.

The philosophies that formed the foundation of the first special recreation agency embrace the concept of inclusion or "recreation for everyone." This concept was the focus of early discussions among recreation professionals regarding the formation of a new entity charged with the responsibility of serving individuals with disabilities.

In an article written in the late-1960s by Earle Hodgen for *Illinois Parks & Recreation* magazine, titled "Recreation Programs for the Handicapped Needed," he states: "Not a single community recreation department in the nation can be said to have a comprehensive program for the handicapped....The Parks and Recreation departments have a large stake and interest in providing the teamwork necessary to make inroads towards a comprehensive recreation program for the handicapped. There is a profound responsibility for the recreation profession to meet the needs of the handicapped as well as the needs of other citizens."

On January 8, 1968, representatives of ten park districts met in the Chicago area to discuss "the possible establishment of a special recreation district for mentally and physically handicapped children in the area." Initially, Hodgen, from the Highland Park and Recreation Department, worked together with Tom Hall of Wilmette Park District to research the possibility of forming this special recreation cooperative. Two of the larger municipalities worked with the school districts to identify the potential populations to be served and to evaluate the extent of needed programs. Subsequently, the first SRA was established as the "Northern Suburban Special Recreation District," serving the communities of Glencoe, Glenview, Deerfield, Highland Park, Highwood, Lake Forest, Northbrook, Northfield, Wilmette and Winnetka.

The first offices of the association were established in the Wilmette Parks and Recreation Department's offices on Green Bay Road in Wilmette. Shortly thereafter the SRAs name was changed and the first director of the "North Suburban Special Recreation Association" (NSSRA), Fred B. McGlone III, was hired and was assisted by a recreation supervisor, Sally Stewart, also from Wilmette Parks and Recreation Department (became Wilmette Park District in 1983).

Shortly thereafter, the administrative offices were moved to the Stratford Center, which was an educational center for trainable mentally handicapped children. Dr. Chuck Panzer, Ed.D., the principal of that school, and Dr. Stanley Bristol,

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"The Special Recreation Associations function as a significant contributing factor to after-institutional care services and more significantly as a community preventative measure and alternative to institutionalization."

◆ *Guidelines for the Formation and Development of Special Recreation Cooperatives in the state of Illinois*
(May 1976)

Ed.D., the executive director of the Northern Suburban Special Education District, were extremely helpful in identifying the populations to be served by the new SRA.

McGlone hired Lillian Black as the registrar secretary and "jack-of-all-trades." She was a tremendous asset to the communication within all the entities who were cooperating to make NSSRA a success. McGlone also hired Larry Reiner as the SRA's first special recreation program supervisor. Reiner was a student in adaptive physical education and was working for Dick Johns and Kay Kastel (Forest) at the Glenview Park District. He was allowed to split his time between NSSRA and Glenview Park District in order to initiate day camps designed for children with disabilities.

In June 1972, Stephen R. Keay replaced McGlone as the executive director, Keay was the assistant superintendent of schools for Kenilworth and had a strong history with the park districts in Chicagoland. He had a vision of what SRAs could be and maintained the energy and commitment to make things happen throughout the state.

Formation of three other special recreation associations followed. The Maine-Niles Association of Special Recreation (M-NASR) (Des Plaines, Golf Maine, Lincolnwood, Morton Grove, Niles, Park Ridge and Skokie) entered its joint agreement in December 1972, and Reiner was hired as its first director in February 1973.

The South Suburban Special Recreation Association (SSSRA) (Chicago Heights, Crete, Homewood Flossmoor, Olympia Fields, Park Forest, Park Forest South and Steger) was formed in June 1973.

The Northwest Special Recreation Association (NWSRA) (Arlington Heights, Buffalo Grove, Elk Grove Village, Hanover Park, Hoffman Estates, Mount Prospect, Palatine, Prospect Heights, River Trails, Rolling Meadows, Salt Creek, Schaumburg, and Wheeling) formed in January 1974. Its first director, Kevin T. Kendrigan, came to the NWSRA that same month, and he continues to serve there today. Kendrigan brought to the SRA field the concepts shared by Dr. William Freeburg, a professor of leisure studies at Southern Illinois University, and one of the founding members of Illinois Special Olympics movement.

Reiner currently serves as the executive director of Northeast DuPage Special Recreation Association (NEDSRA) and has represented the association for the last 20 years. He and Kendrigan are the only two professional staff from the original associations who continue to serve in the SRA field. While Steve Keay has since passed away, his efforts continue to make an impact on today's services.

In 1975, the directors of the existing SRAs began meeting in what would soon develop into SRANI (Special Recreation Associations of Northern Illinois). In 1978, this agency expanded to meet the growing educational needs of the therapeutic recreation professionals working in community-based settings or SRAs. Today, SRANI serves 23 SRAs and 10 affiliate member agencies with 202 professional members and 25 affiliate members.

Special recreation associations are committed to providing comprehensive leisure services for children and adults who have diverse disabling conditions or "abilities." Persons with various levels of mental retardation, physical disabilities, emotional disturbances, hard-of-hearing/deaf, visual impairments/ blind and multiple disabilities are provided opportunities for quality leisure services specifically oriented towards individual ability levels. Pilot programs are initiated to serve the newly disabled and temporarily disabled residents. Recreation programs were designed for accident victims, heart disease patients, stroke patients and individuals with other chronic neuromuscular disorders.

Even from the beginning it was realized that not every disabled individual is in need of specialized recreation services. SRAs initiate services that allow individuals with disabilities to access member park district and village recreation programs. By providing opportunities for involvement in new situations and environments, individuals with limiting conditions can learn about and become comfortable with leisure opportunities. Thus, they will be able to independently pursue them.

With the development of SRAs, a new frontier in community services has opened. The special recreation cooperatives found that many of the people served, with the appropriate training and experiences, will eventually be involved in mainstream society. By providing them with opportunities to participate in quality leisure activities and an opportunity to develop a positive self-concept, the local park districts and villages are providing a service that can upgrade the quality of life in the total community.

Legal and Legislative Milestones

The legal base for special recreation cooperatives came as a result of Senate Bills 745 and 746 of the 1969 Illinois General Assembly. Under the 1970 Illinois State Constitution, it is now legal for government agencies to enter into such agreements. This legislation was designed for communities with a population base of 500,000 or fewer.

The initial legislation created sections 810-A and 810-B of the Park District Code, effective August 18, 1969. Section 810-B was amended in 1980 and again in 1983 in order to meet the developing needs

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of communities that belonged to SRAs. In any aspect of the enabling legislation there were no restrictions on the maximum number of communities that could be served within a joint agreement, the severity of disability nor the etiology of the disability, nor the ages of the individuals who could be served.

(1969-1972) Park districts contributed tax dollars from their recreation and corporate tax levies to initiate and maintain services referred to as "special recreation" (Section 810-A and 810-B of the Park District Code). Funding for these cooperatives was made possible through Senate Bills 1442 and 1443, introduced and passed in 1972 by the Illinois General Assembly. These bills allowed park districts and municipalities to levy by referendum up to .02% of \$100 of assessed valuations for the "recreation of the handicapped."

These bills were introduced to allow this levy without a referendum; however, they were amended to require the same. Significant energy was expended to remove the referendum requirement from the legislation; thus, two entirely new bills were introduced: Senate Bills 220 and 221. Legislation was obtained in the 1995 Illinois General Assembly; however, the bills were again amended to require a referendum by petition clause in each bill. This amendatory act of 1975 is not a limit upon any municipality that is a home rule unit.

(1974 -1975) Park districts established new legislation under Section 5-8 of the Park District Code to create a special recreation tax levy for cooperatives providing special recreation under Section 810-A and 810-B of the Park District Code. These funds may be legally accessed only through the participation in a joint agreement.

(1976- 1977) Many new SRAs formed and began serving the disabled residents of the collar counties around Chicagoland.

(1977-1984) Programs flourished and new services established that were never provided for people with disabilities. Illinois SRAs led the country in the new services arena and were recognized with many National Gold Medal Awards.

(1986-1987) New legislation was created with the full support of the Taxpayers Federation and bipartisan support of the legislature. The .02% tax levy rate limit for special recreation associations was increased to .04% and all referendum requirements were removed from Section 5-8 of the Park District Code. It was recognized that special recreation associations do not have the authority to place an issue before the public through a referendum. It was further recognized that in the remote possibility that an association received permission from all of its member communities to place an issue to a subsequent referendum before the public, it would have little or no chance of success universally across all of the partners in the special recreation cooperative. Thus,

any such action would be destructive to the spirit of cooperation on which the formation of special recreation associations were based.

(1987-1991) New SRAs were formed, this time in more rural communities where a higher tax rate was required to generate sufficient funds based on EAV. Metro Chicagoland associations expanded services, creating models for inclusion and integration support services, developing wheelchair sports facilities and increasing Special Olympics and specialized service opportunities.

(Jan, 26, 1991) The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law.

(1991) The Tax Limitation Act of 1991 was signed into law. Under the new "tax cap," park districts again were placed in the position of contributing what essentially amounts to an allocation that has direct impact on the recreation and/or corporate levies. Special recreation tax levy in Section 5-8 of the Park District Code would no longer be a tax specifically set aside for the purpose of providing services for people with disabilities in addition to those which were available to the general public. Now these funds fall under the aggregate levy as they did 25 years ago in 1969 through 1972 and the SRAs affected do not have the authority to place this issue before the public through a referendum.

For so many years, professionals around the country have recognized that Illinois' unique special district system and special tax levy have enabled the state to do so much for the people with disabilities. Without the special protection, our progressive approach to people with disabilities has a serious potential to fall behind.

The elected commissioners and trustees of Illinois park districts have an incredible commitment to people with disabilities. The professional expertise that exists in the field of therapeutic recreation works hand in hand with those in public parks and recreation and forms a very unique marriage of efforts to provide excellence in public service.

The history of special recreation associations is very short but has many significant milestones. SRAs look forward with a positive outlook regarding what we can do together for all people to maintain a quality of life that makes us proud.

LARRY REINER, CIP

is the executive director of the Northeast DuPage Special Recreation Association and the president of the Buffalo Grove Park District board of commissioners.

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Special Circumstances

Is the SRA boom of the '70s and '80s headed for a bust?

By John N. McGovern



Photo by Brigid Buchert, Special Recreation Association of Central Lake County

Conventional wisdom says “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” But there are times when you can see something breaking and can step in and save it, and this is one of those times.

We are talking about the award-winning model of providing recreation programs for people with disabilities: special recreation associations or SRAs. Political, social, and legal forces are amassed and unless they are diverted, they will ruin the special recreation association model. This article reviews those forces, and proposes some changes that could allow the 32-year-old special recreation association movement to thrive for another three decades.

1960s: Do it alone or do it together

In the late 1960s, park districts were asked with increasing frequency to provide recreation opportunities for children with disabilities. More and more families were seeing their children with disabilities receive education services in school districts and the popular question was “If the schools can do it, why can’t the park districts?”

Some park districts experimented with summer programs and the occasional bowling or social program. Adding to interest in this area, the Chicago Park District hosted the first Special Olympics competition in 1968 at Soldier Field.

In 1969, the park districts in the northern suburbs asked for help from the Illinois General Assembly. The Illinois Association of Park Districts supported the issue and worked with legislators and park district officials to solve the problem. Ultimately, the General Assembly created Section 8-10.1 of the Park District Code, which autho-

izes park districts to establish, maintain, and manage recreation programs for persons with all types of disability. The statute authorizes park districts to provide transportation, hire professional employees, and to charge fees for these services. This was the important first step: establishing authority for park districts, acting alone, to provide recreation for people with disabilities.

But the problem was one of scope and size, not just authority. Even in large park districts of 50,000 or more residents, there were too few people with disabilities to provide adequate programs. The incidence of disability was even less in park districts with 10,000 or fewer residents. So the General Assembly, at the same time it established authority for park districts to act alone, granted legislative authority for park districts and municipalities to form special recreation partnerships. Section 8-10.2 provides that two or more park districts can join together for the express purpose of providing recreation programs for people with disabilities who live in the cooperating districts. The organizations, called special recreation associations or SRAs, have the same authority that a single park district has and can also own real property for the use of the special recreation association. Specifically, Section 8-10.2 provides the authority for individuals, municipalities, or park districts, to work together to maintain staff, to define the relationship between the various partners, to constitute a governing board, and to provide other requirements for operations of programs as are believed to be necessary. In the Municipal Code, Section 11-95-13, and 11-95-14, similar authority exists and was approved on May 29, 1969.

"It is a pretty simple idea," says Kevin Kendrigan, the executive direc-

tor of the Northwest Special Recreation Association, the largest of the 25 SRAs. "By cooperating, the partner communities can provide more service to their residents, at less cost to the taxpayer."

1970s and 1980s: Funding issues and answers spur SRA growth

Eager to serve their residents, park districts formed four special recreation associations within four years of the General Assembly's action, from 1970 to 1974. The Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association (NSSRA) was first, followed closely by the South Suburban Special Recreation Association (SSSRA).

"We knew this was a need, we just were not sure how to do it," says Mary Gregoire, director of the Olympia Fields Park District. "We knew we couldn't do it on our own, so as soon as the General Assembly gave us the ability to form an SRA we did."

In the first several years of their existence, the park district partnerships were funded with support from townships (using now-extinct federal Revenue Sharing funds) and park district sources. Within three years it was clear that these sources were inadequate. It was equally clear that more park district partnerships would form if a stream of funding was available.

In 1975 the General Assembly acted again and established Section 5-8 of the Park District Code. This section authorized a park district that was a partner in a special recreation association to levy up to \$.02 per \$100 of equalized assessed valuation (EAV), pursuant to referendum by petition. It



Photo by Janet Pletcher, Northwest Special Recreation Association

Among all the park districts in an SRA, between \$1,500,000 and \$2,000,000 is spent annually to support participation in recreation programs in the most integrated setting as required by the ADA.

also restricted the expenditure of those funds to costs directly related to the costs of operating the special recreation association. The same authority was incorporated into the Municipal Code. This dedicated source of funds spurred an explosion in the number of communities receiving special recreation services. Between 1975 and 1980, park districts formed 15 special recreation associations. Five more were formed in the 1980s.

A little more than ten years later, park districts and special recreation associations were concerned about the growing demand for recreation for people with disabilities. More and more of the park districts and cities in special recreation agreements were at the \$.02 levy rate maximum and demand was rising faster than resources. In 1987 the General Assembly removed the referendum by petition requirement and doubled the allowable tax rate to \$.04. This

measure passed with the support of the Illinois Taxpayers Federation. The existence of this stable source of funds has benefitted hundreds of thousands of Illinois residents with disabilities. It also resulted in another surge in the creation of special recreation associations, with six more being created.

1990s: SRA growth slows to a stop

Up until this point, the history of special recreation associations in Illinois has been one of constant growth. The General Assembly acted in the interest of the public and at the request of the public and the park districts. SRAs won award after award at the national level. Then, things changed and not one special recreation association was created in the 1990s, and the number of communities joining special recreation associations slowed to a trickle.

Why?

One reason is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which has had a dramatic impact on the types of services that are being provided by special recreation associations in Illinois. The ADA became effective January 26, 1992. It requires that recreation programs be available for people with disabilities in the "most integrated setting." Among all the park districts in an SRA, between \$1,500,000 and \$2,000,000 is spent annually to support participation in recreation programs in the most integrated setting as required by the ADA.

"The impact of inclusion has been staggering for some of the partnerships," says Jane Hodgkinson, executive

director of the Western Du Page Special Recreation Association. "In three of the partnerships, a combined amount of more than \$1,000,000 annually is expended to meet high demand for inclusion. That \$1,000,000 has come from revenue that would otherwise have been expended for conventional recreation programs for persons with disabilities."

Another reason is that the model doesn't work as well in rural areas or less densely populated communities. In the metropolitan Chicago area or in developed areas like Rockford, Champaign-Urbana, and Peoria, communities are in close proximity and have enough population base to make the partnerships advantageous. However, in Macomb, Kewanee and Roxana, neighboring communities are too far away to make a partnership practical.

Indeed, it has become extremely difficult under the Property Tax Extension Limitation Act (or tax cap) for any new communities to enter into joint agreement programs. Since the tax cap became effective in 1991, only four communities have joined a special recreation partnership: the Village of Lincolnshire, the Village of Riverwoods, the Grayslake Area Park District, and just this April, the Village of Harwood Heights.

"The Village of Harwood Heights is a logical partner for us, being so close to Norridge Park District and the Village of Elmwood Park," says Sandy Gbur, executive director of the West Suburban Special Recreation Association. "If the Village had not been a home rule municipality, this would have been a much more

difficult decision for the Village to make."

This is because under the Property Tax Extension Limitation Act, to provide the funds required to join a partnership requires taking those funds from other levies or other revenue sources, or passing a referendum. Many municipalities and park districts fear that because of the relatively small incidence of disability that a referendum question will fail.

2000s: The impact of medical technology, economics, and lawsuits

Today advances in medical technology save the lives of many newborns who just five years ago would have died. These children live on with disabilities and stay in the community. They demand services, including recreation. At the other end of the spectrum, doctors save more adults who experience traumatic injuries or conditions, and they too return to home and live with disabilities in the community.

As a result, many SRAs are facing very difficult financial times. As demand rises due to demographic reasons, and as the stable source of revenue shrinks because of the implementation of the tax cap, both the quality of service and the quantity of service are jeopardized. Each of the 26 existing special recreation associations reports one of these symptoms of problems ahead:

- deficit budgets
- program reductions
- service waiting lists
- employee reductions
- rapidly rising fees for service

Another stress on SRAs is a nationwide trend in court and adminis-



Photo by Ann Londrigan, IAPD

trative decisions to declare acts by units of local government to be discriminatory when people with disabilities don't receive appropriate service or when service is denied. From Barrington to San Francisco to New York, federal courts and hearing officers are forcing parks and recreation agencies to comply with ADA requirements, and no entity has successfully defended a case by claiming that it could not afford the service requested. Park districts that cry poor, pointing to the restrictions of the tax cap, will receive little sympathy in court.

2002: Searching for a solution

It is clear the current funding method for public recreation opportunities for people with disabilities is inadequate now. In three years, it will be a crisis. Continued service reductions, growing demand, growing waiting lists, and growing inclusion demands in communities where that demand has not yet evolved, will erode the stability of the special recreation associations.

The challenge today is to develop revenue streams that will provide for continued local support of people with disabilities, and to, where possible, revise the current system.

Says Terry Porter, director of the Wilmette Park District: "We have to think differently about SRAs. We either have to change the way they are funded, or change what they do, or consider cutting services provided by SRAs."

One suggestion is to ask the General Assembly to enact a once-only exemption that would permit a park district or non-home rule municipality to become a partner in an SRA by raising its tax levy above the aggregate. In subsequent years, the increased levy would be subject to the Property Tax Extension Limitation Act. This would enable communities not yet in a special recreation association to join one. Another suggestion is to exempt the Section 5-8 levy from the tax cap.

Another suggestion is to allow a unified referendum in all SRA communities. Present law would require each park district or city served by an SRA to hold separate referenda to increase

tax support for the SRA. Conducting six, ten, or fourteen referenda would be very difficult and unwieldy. But, holding one referendum across all six to fourteen communities would be more manageable and consistent with the intent of the tax cap.

Another suggestion is to seek state



Since the tax cap became effective in 1991, only four communities have joined a special recreation partnership.

Photo by Becki Serrato, Joliet Park District

funds. The special recreation associations have been working together to become eligible for funds from the State of Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS). Many DHS program outcomes are identical to SRA outcomes: increased independence, better employability, acquisition of social skills, and

better inclusion into the community. This solution is part of the legislative platform of the Illinois Association of Park Districts and the Illinois Park and Recreation Association.

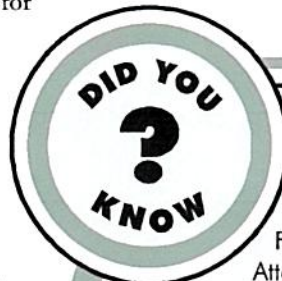
Fees, too, are an issue. The ADA prohibits park districts and SRAs from charging people with disabilities fees that are higher than fees charged to people without disabilities for similar recreation programs. The challenge in a special recreation setting is to identify

where fee revenue can be increased without having a discriminatory result.

Bottom line, recreation for people with disabilities is a park district issue, not an

SRA issue. The problems facing special recreation associations will be solved when park district elected officials and administrators treat it as a priority, not as an issue the "SRA people" are solving. Most communities want the same level of service or greater service for people with disabilities. So the trick in the next two years, to avoid a crisis is to determine what that source of revenue will be. If we work together, we can "fix it" before it is broken. If we wait, we may never be able to fix it. ■

John N. McGovern is the executive director of the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association. A long-time member of the Joint Legislative Committee, he writes and speaks frequently about recreation and people with disabilities.



Recreation Access Illinois is a new resource for people with disabilities to learn where they can participate in recreation, fitness and sports activities. Funded by a grant from the Illinois Attorney General's Office, the resource was developed by the Illinois Association of Park Districts and Illinois SRAs. See www.recreationaccessillinois.org or call 800.900.8086 (voice and TTY).

Champaign-Urbana Special Recreation
 1311 W. Church, Champaign, IL 61821
 217.398.2374 – 217.398.2375 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Champaign Park District,
 Urbana Park District

Fox Valley Special Recreation Association
 1 N. Lincolnway, North Aurora, IL 60542
 630.896.6066
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Batavia Park District, Fox
 Valley Park District, Geneva Park District, St.
 Charles Park District

Gateway Special Recreation Association
 15W431 59th St., Burr Ridge, IL 60527
 630.325.3857 – 630.325.9702 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Burr Ridge Park District,
 Countryside Recreation Department, Elmhurst
 Park District, Hinsdale Parks & Recreation, Oak
 Brook Park District, Pleasant Dale Park District,
 Westchester Park District, Willowbrook Parks
 and Recreation

Heart of Illinois Special Recreation Association
 8727 N. Pioneer Road, Peoria, IL 61615
 309.691.1929
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Morton Park Dis
 trict, Peoria Park District

Joliet-Bolingbrook Special Recreation Association
 230 E. Briarcliff Road, Bolingbrook, IL 60440
 630.739.1124 – 630.739.2287 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Bolingbrook Park District

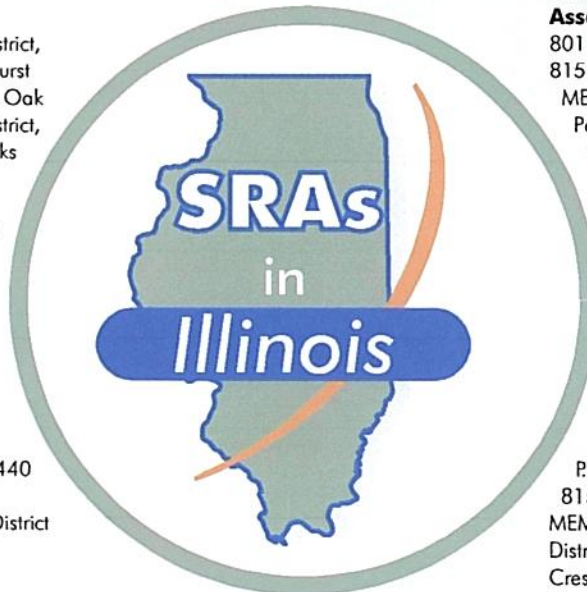
Lincolnway Special Recreation Association
 329 W. Maple, P.O. Box 442, New Lenox, IL
 60451
 815.485.9517
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Frankfort Park District,
 Mokena Community Park District, New Lenox
 Community Park District, Peotone Park District

Maine-Niles Association of Special Recreation (M-NASR)
 6820 Dempster Street, Morton Grove, IL 60053
 847.966.5522 – 847.966.8897 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Des Plaines Park District,
 Golf-Maine Park District, Lincolnwood Park and
 Recreation Department, Morton Grove Park
 District, Niles Park District, Park Ridge Recre
 ation & Park District, Skokie Park District

Northeast DuPage Special Recreation Association (NEDSRA)
 1770 W. Centennial Place, Addison, IL 60101
 630.620.4500 – 630.620.7477 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Addison Park District,
 Bensenville Park District, Butterfield Park District,
 Glendale Heights Recreation Department, Itasca

Park District, Lombard Park District, Medinah
 Park District, Oakbrook Terrace Park District,
 Villa Park Recreation Department, Wood Dale
 Park District, York Center Park District

Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association (NISRA)
 820 E. Terra Cotta Ave., Ste. 125, Crystal Lake,
 IL 60014
 815.459.0737 – 815.459.0737 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Barrington Park District,
 Cary Park District, Crystal Lake Park District,
 Dundee Township Park District, City of Harvard,
 Marengo Park District, City of McHenry,
 Wauconda Park District, City of Woodstock



Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association (NSSRA)
 3105 MacArthur, Northbrook, IL 60062
 847.509.9400
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Deerfield Park District,
 Glencoe Park District, Glenview Park District,
 Park District of Highland Park, Kenilworth Park
 District, Lake Bluff Park District, Lake Forest Rec
 reation Department, Northbrook Park District,
 Northfield Park District, Village of Riverwoods,
 Wilmette Park District, Winnetka Park District

Northwest Special Recreation Association (NWSRA)
 3000 W. Central Rd., Suite 205, Rolling Mead
 ows, IL 60008
 847.392.2848 – 847.392.2855 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Arlington Heights Park
 District, Bartlett Park District, Buffalo Grove Park
 District, Elk Grove Park District, Hanover Park
 Park District, Hoffman Estates Park District, In
 verness Park District, Mount Prospect Park Dis
 trict, Palatine Park District, Prospect Heights Park
 District, River Trails Park District, Rolling Mead

ows Park District, Salt Creek Park District,
 Schaumburg Park District, Streamwood Park
 District, Wheeling Park District

Oak Lawn Park District Special Recreation Cooperative
 4625 W. 110th St., Oak Lawn, IL 60453
 708.857.2200
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Bridgeview Park District,
 Burbank Park District, South and Central
 Stickney, Chicago Ridge Park District, Village of
 Evergreen Park, City of Hometown, Hickory Hills
 Park District, Oak Lawn Park District, Palos Hills
 Park District, Worth Township

River Valley Special Recreation Association
 801 W. Station, Kankakee, IL 60901
 815.933.7336
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Bourbonnais Township
 Park District, Kankakee Valley Park District,
 Limestone Township Park District

Rockford Park District, Therapeutic Recreation Services
 1401 N. Second St., Rockford, IL 61107-
 3086
 815.987.1614 – 815.987.1600 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Freeport Park
 District, Rockford Park District

South Suburban Special Recreation Association (SSSRA)
 P.O. Box 1097, Frankfort, IL 60423
 815.806.0384 - 815.806.0389 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Country Club Hills Park
 District, Frankfort Square Park District, Hazel
 Crest Park District, Homewood-Flossmoor Park
 District, Village of Matteson, Oak Forest Park
 District, Olympia Fields Park District, Village of
 Park Forest, Village of Richton Park, Tinley Park
 Park District

Southeast Association Special Parks & Recreation (SEASPAR)
 6000 S. Main St., Downers Grove, IL 60516
 630.960.1144
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Clarendon Hills Park
 District, Darien Park District, Downers Grove
 Park District, Village of Indian Head Park, Park
 District of LaGrange, Community Park District of
 LaGrange Park, Lisle Park District, Western
 Springs Recreation Department, Westmont Park
 District, Woodridge Park District

Southwest Special Recreation Association (SWSRA)
 12521 S. Kostner, Alsip, IL 60658
 708.389.9423
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Alsip Park District, Blue
 Island Park District, Justice Park District,
 Midlothian Park District, Palos Heights Recre
 ation Department, Posen Park District, Summit
 Park District, Village of Merrionette Park

Special Recreation of Joliet & Channahon

3000 W. Jefferson St., Joliet, IL 60435
815.741.7275 ext. 169
MEMBER AGENCIES: Channahon Park District, Joliet Park District

Special Recreation Association of Central Lake County (SRACLCLC)

290 Oakwood, Vernon Hills, IL 60061
847.816.4866 – 847.816.4866 TTY
MEMBER AGENCIES: Grayslake Community Park District, Mundelein Park and Recreation District, Village of Indian Creek, Village of Lake Zurich, Village of Libertyville, Village of Lincolnshire, Vernon Hills Park District

Special Recreation Services

1624 E. 154th Street, Dolton, IL 60419
708.841.4034
MEMBER AGENCIES: Calumet Memorial Park District, Dolton Park District, Lan-Oak Park District, Riverdale Park District, South Holland Recreation Department

Special Recreation Services of Northern Lake County (SRSNLC)

2200 East Grass Lake Road, Lindenhurst, IL 60046
847.356.6011

814 Hart Rd., Round Lake, IL 60073
847.546.8558

2000 Belvidere Rd., Waukegan, IL 60085
847.360.4762

2400 Dowie Memorial Dr., Zion, IL 60099
847.746.5500

MEMBER AGENCIES: Lindenhurst Park District, Round Lake Area Park District, Waukegan Park District, Zion Park District

Tri-County Special Recreation Association

16028 127th Street, Lemont, IL 60439
630.257.6787
MEMBER AGENCIES: Lemont Park District, Lockport Township Park District, Village of Romeoville

Warren Special Recreation Association

17801 W. Washington St., Gurnee, IL 60031
847.244.6619
MEMBER AGENCIES: Gurnee Park District, Grandwood Park District, Warren Township, Wildwood Park District

West Suburban Special Recreation Association (WSSRA)

2915 Maple St., Franklin Park, IL 60131
847.455.2100 – 847.455.2100 TTY

MEMBER AGENCIES: Berwyn Park District, Clyde Park District, Village of Elmwood Park, Park District of Forest Park, Franklin Park Park District, Village of Harwood Heights, Hawthorne Park District, Norridge Park District, North Berwyn Park District, Park District of Oak Park, River Forest Park District

Western DuPage Special Recreation Association (WDSRA)

116 N. Schmale Rd., Carol Stream, IL 60188
630.681.0962
MEMBER AGENCIES: Bloomingdale Park District, Carol Stream Park District, Glen Ellyn Park District, Naperville Park District, Roselle Park District, Warrenville Park District, West Chicago Park District, Wheaton Park District, Winfield Park District

Source: IAPD/IPRA Membership Directory and Buyers' Guide 2002-2003

