

General Principles Regarding Neighborhood Centers

INTRODUCTION

There are a total of 14 Neighborhood Centers located in seven of Columbia's 10 villages. These buildings range in size from 586 to 4,400 square feet. Most were built early in Columbia's development — on average, they are 46 years old.

The Rouse Company's initial plans called for placing a Neighborhood Center in each of Columbia's neighborhoods. That plan was adjusted over time, reduced in scope and ultimately abandoned, providing Columbia with 14 Neighborhood Centers instead of 25 buildings. A majority of the Neighborhood Centers were built to residential standards and do not meet existing building codes for ADA compliance and energy conservation.

BACKGROUND

[Note that the background information is taken from research performed from papers available in the Columbia Archives.]

Although we think of the Neighborhood Center as a particular building, the original concept was quite different. It might best be described as a Neighborhood Center complex. The heart of the Neighborhood Center was to be the school. In the original plan a neighborhood would serve 300 to 500 families and the Neighborhood Center would have the following elements.

1. Lower school K-4
2. Nursery
3. Tot lot
4. Child care
5. Community rooms
6. Recreation site
7. Store
8. Terrace
9. Swimming pool
10. Playing fields
11. Park

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12. Parking lot

In a sense, a Neighborhood Center was a much smaller version of a Village Center. It was to be the focal point of the neighborhood, a place where people would gather.

In a document dated December 10, 1965, the proposal for Neighborhood Center One (which we now know as the Bryant Woods neighborhood in Wilde Lake) called for the center to serve 1,000 families and have the following elements:

1. Elementary school
2. Plaza
3. Preschool training
4. Community meeting room
5. Swimming pool
6. Convenience store

According to the December 10, 1965 document, the purpose of a Neighborhood Center is to be the focal point of neighborhood activity. A number of Neighborhood Centers (complexes) were built. By 1971, the Neighborhood Center concept had evolved to include the following elements.

1. Plaza (to contain a children's play area)
2. Parking for 40 cars
3. Commercial store of 3,000 sq ft
4. Community building of 1,000 sq ft
5. Nursery building of 6,400 sq ft
6. Swimming pool 82.5 ft by 42 ft with a 25x25 ft diving area
7. Training pool 20 ft by 40 ft
8. Community room/Bath house of 1,000 sq ft

In 1972, a task force produced a report, part of which addressed Neighborhood Centers. The report stated that what was originally intended as a place for formal and informal groups to meet had become a multifunctional facility of changing purpose with early childhood programs (specifically coops) expanding to become the major users of meeting rooms. It suggested that separate meeting space continue to be provided in neighborhood centers by either building larger facilities or attaching such a facility to the elementary school. Even in the very early years of Columbia, the original concept of community meeting space was being overtaken by other activities, particularly early childhood programs.

By 1973, the Neighborhood Center concept had further evolved. The Neighborhood Center can be viewed as part of the overall strategy of supporting the goal of creating a social and physical environment which will work for people, nourishing human growth. A Neighborhood Center was to have the following elements.

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1. Elementary school
2. Athletic fields
3. Free play area
4. Contained play area
5. Covered play area
6. Swimming pool & bathhouse
7. Enclosed community facility including
 - a. Community store with an eating area
 - b. Lounge area
 - c. Learning space for pre-school which can also be used for meeting and social space
 - d. Kitchen
 - e. Storage area & toilets

And a plaza area to link the various buildings. Once again, a key part of a Neighborhood Center was the elementary school.

By the end of 1971, the Rouse Company realized that placing a convenience store in each Neighborhood Center was not working. The stores were too close together to make them viable. The convenience store space started being used for other purposes. By 1978, the Neighborhood Center stores had the following uses.

- Bryant Woods (3,000 sq ft): 7-11
- Running Brook (3,000 sq ft): 7-11
- Faulkner Ridge (3,000 sq ft): American Pre-school
- Longfellow (3,000 sq ft): American Pre-school
- Swansfield (3,000 sq ft): CPRA
- Stevens Forest (3,000 sq ft): Nature's Way Pre-school
- Talbott Springs (3,000 sq ft): Columbia School for the Arts
- Talbott Springs (3,000 sq ft): vacant
- Thunder Hill (2,000 sq ft): a convenience store
- Thunder Hill (300 sq ft): storage for Soccer Association
- Thunder Hill (700 sq ft): vacant

The Neighborhood Center store space began to be used for educational purposes.

Clearly, the concept of a Neighborhood Center has evolved over time. Many of the commercial stores no longer exist. Not every neighborhood has an elementary school. And once the elementary school disappeared, the concept of being the focal point of the neighborhood was no longer viable. In fact, the Rouse Company eventually stopped building Neighborhood Centers.

DISCUSSION

From the evolving thought regarding Neighborhood Centers, one begins to understand why our

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current Neighborhood Centers buildings are so different - some are attached to pool houses, some are stand alone, the original ones are small as they were envisioned as meeting space and part of a larger complex and the later ones are large as they were envisioned to have several functions under one roof.

So what is the concept of a Neighborhood Center in 2020 and beyond? Clearly, Neighborhood Centers are not the focal point of a neighborhood. Many things have changed since the first concept of a Neighborhood Center was developed. Columbia is now developed (and undergoing redevelopment). People's lifestyles have significantly changed since the early years of Columbia. Another change is that we now think of the Neighborhood Center as a particular CA building. The elementary school, the store, the pool are all considered separate and not necessarily related to each other. We don't even consider them when discussing Neighborhood Centers.

The existing Neighborhood Centers are used (except MacGill's Common). They provide a service to those Villages. In six Villages which have Neighborhood Centers, usage is split between coop/nursery schools and meeting space. Some Neighborhood Centers are rented on a long term basis. Some are stand-alone and some are attached to pool houses. One neighborhood Center (MacGills Commons) is already proposed to be removed from service and the space it occupies to be used to improve the pool house to which it is attached.

In considering Neighborhood Centers, cost has to be a factor; not the only one, but still a factor. CA does not have unlimited funds. Another important factor is how can a Neighborhood Center best serve the community.

Even though the times have changed, there are two parts of the original concept which still remain: space for people to meet and coops/nursery schools.

As the CA Board is committed to developing a policy regarding Neighborhood Centers, the following should be considered and discussed. This will help provide guidance in crafting the policy.

Definition: A Neighborhood Center is a CA owned facility located in a Columbia neighborhood built for community, not recreational, use.

Why? This is how we now view a Neighborhood Center.

Philosophy: A Neighborhood Center is part of CA's overall strategy to create and nurture a social and physical environment which will work for people, nourishing human growth.

Why? It really is the philosophy from the beginning. If a Neighborhood Centers is not meeting CA's overall strategy to serve the community, then why is CA supporting it?

Purpose of a Neighborhood Center

1. The primary purpose of a Neighborhood Center is to provide inexpensive meeting space for the community.

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- a. *Why?* This was a key part of the concept from the very beginning and a concept which is still needed, can be met by CA (via the villages), and serves the community.
2. The secondary purpose is to provide space for coops/nursery school.
 - a. *Why?* This is also a part of the original concept for a Neighborhood Center.

New Neighborhood Centers: CA will not build any new Neighborhood Centers.

Why? 50 years later, Neighborhood Centers are not the focal point of a neighborhood. 11 Columbia neighborhoods (soon to be 12) have no Neighborhood Centers and all of them are successful. As shown in these neighborhoods, the need for meeting space can be provided in other ways.

Repair & Maintenance of Existing Neighborhood Centers: Since CA owns the facility, CA should continue to perform the normal repairs and maintenance needed to keep the facility operational.

Why? CA assets should be maintained. If CA believes an asset is no longer needed, then it should make the decision to dispose of the asset.

Issue: Should existing Coops/Nursery schools continue to use Neighborhood Centers? Coops/Nursery schools quickly became part of a Neighborhood Center concept. Existing coops/nursery schools do provide a community service and were part of the original vision (it is not clear that the original vision considered coops & meeting space in the same facility). However, requirements for coops/nursery schools have changed considerably since the early days of Columbia. And the number of coops have decreased over the years. Nursery schools can be accommodated in commercial spaces. So long as the existing facility can serve a coop/nursery school they should continue to use the facility. However, should a coop/nursery school leave (or disband) a Neighborhood Center, there may be better community uses for that facility. One major point to consider is what happens if code changes make an existing Neighborhood Center unfit for a coop/nursery school? Expanding and bringing an existing building up to code is an expensive process. In this situation is the continued use of the facility the best way to serve the community or should other uses be considered?

Issue: Should there be kitchens in Neighborhood Centers?

Neighborhood Centers are not residential buildings, so kitchens have to meet commercial code. This requires space (many of the centers are not large) and funds to both meet code and to continue to operate. Having a microwave and a refrigerator is not a kitchen. Is it a wise use of CA funds to provide commercial kitchens in Neighborhood Centers? What are the benefits of such kitchens?

Issue: Should Neighborhood Centers have commercial uses?

Neighborhood Centers were envisioned as providing meeting space and early childhood education space. Commercial uses were to be in a separate building. Having commercial uses precludes using the space for meetings and other community activities.

Issue: Should Neighborhood Centers be used to provide meeting space?

Meeting space for the community was one of the key elements of the original Neighborhood Center concept and still remains a very important community use. However, would the community be better served if additional meeting space was provided in a Village Center? Do the smaller Neighborhood

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Centers provide adequate space for meetings and other community activities? Do they have adequate parking?

Issue: What to do about restrooms in Neighborhood Centers which do not meet current code? Restrooms need to be ADA-compliant and some of the existing Neighborhood Center restrooms do not meet code. Expanding the restrooms to meet code will reduce the amount of usable space. When does the amount of usable space decrease to where the facility does not adequately serve the community? For the smaller Neighborhood Centers and those whose primary use is coop/nursery school or for meetings, perhaps a single ADA-compliant restroom is all that would be needed. This would minimize space needed for a restroom.

Issue: Should space in Neighborhood Center attached to a pool house be used to improve the pool house?

Some of our pool houses to which Neighborhood Centers are attached need to be renovated and brought up to code (particularly regarding ADA accessibility). To do this, space from the Neighborhood Center could be used. This would reduce the amount of usable space in that Neighborhood Center. However, is the community better served by improving the pool house or by keeping the Neighborhood Center at its current size?

Issue: Do smaller Neighborhood Centers effectively serve the community?

Some of the existing Neighborhood Centers are small. For the ones without a coop/nursery school do they still adequately serve the community? Can the community be better served by additional space at the Village Center or in another larger building? Is there an optimal size for a Neighborhood Center? CA had a variety of Village Community Centers, but settled on a certain sized Community Center which seems to adequately serve those Villages. If CA stays with the concept of Neighborhood Center, should a similar approach to standardization be adopted?

Issue: Should an existing Neighborhood Center be rebuilt if it is destroyed or damaged beyond normal repair?

Issue: Are there other users for Neighborhood Centers?

Some ideas to consider - a teen center, partnering with HC Library (STEM), other partners who could use space to meet community needs.

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