

## **Not Your Grandfather's Senior Center**

Grand Prairie project reveals the future of fun after fifty

*By Stephen Springs, Brinkley Sargent Architects*

Start with a personal training session in the state-of-the-art exercise facilities. Swim some laps in the infinity edge pool and lounge in the 30-person hot tub. Have a cocktail on the patio overlooking the water. Catch a movie in the on-site theatre. Then dance the night away in the ballroom.

It's not an ad for a hot new Caribbean resort. It's a mere sampling of amenities at the Summit, the new 50-plus club in Grand Prairie, Texas. Yes, it's a senior center. And it's the beginning of a revolution in the way communities serve their older citizens.

### **Times are Changing**

For years now, community rec centers have been transforming themselves, as the jock-oriented gyms of old have grown to provide not just athletic pursuits, but social and entertainment options for the whole family. The changing requirements for modern senior centers are certainly part of that trend, but the challenges and opportunities may be even greater.

Mention a "senior center" to most people, and they're likely to conjure images of bingo games and blood pressure screenings. While these traditional activities and services still have their place, there's an emerging set of younger, more active seniors placing new demands on community facilities.

It's a tale of two generations. With the majority of Baby Boomers now in their 50s, city governments are hearing an undeniable call for workout facilities, deluxe amenities, and social events that cater to this group just entering their golden years. In fact, the new Summit in Grand Prairie, which opened in May 2010, intentionally avoids calling itself a "senior center," sidestepping the over-the-hill stigma that pushes spry middle-agers away from such places. At the same time, however, centers like the Summit must continue to serve the needs of the older generation, those in their late 60s and above, who have different interests and abilities.

It's a challenge that parks and recreation departments, architects, urban planners and other professionals are facing nationwide, whether updating old facilities or building new ones. The City of Grand Prairie's groundbreaking solution sets a new bar for public sector facilities.

"The Summit is unlike any other active adult center in the nation," said Summit Manager Linda Long. "Our primary target audience is Grand Prairie residents of at least age 50. These active adults seek more physical fitness and social opportunities than previous generations, and The Summit is ideally suited for them."

## Envisioning the Summit

It started with the simple need for more space – a new building to accommodate a growing population of seniors. It wasn't until the city began to closely examine the needs and wants of its residents that an opportunity emerged to create something truly innovative.

From the earliest planning stages, Grand Prairie worked with Brinkley Sargent Architects to conduct extensive research of public facilities that might be in line with the multi-generational approach they envisioned. Surprisingly, none offered the whole package. Most traditional senior centers still projected a “geriatric” atmosphere, while all-ages recreation facilities failed to achieve an environment that active adults would embrace and call their own.

“In planning for this facility we visited senior centers in other cities, then quickly realized our vision was much more in line with private sector,” said Rick Herold, Grand Prairie Parks and Recreation Director. “So we started looking at country clubs, resorts, and the activity centers in retirement communities by Robson and Del Webb. And, we asked our target market what they wanted through focus groups and one-on-one interviews.”

As the vision for the Summit took shape, the possibilities seemed endless. But that's not to say the city was starting with an entirely clean slate. The new facility would need to fit into a larger master-planned development called Central Park, which was already in progress. In addition to inviting features like a lake and surrounding boardwalk, the development also included a new Public Safety building. Grand Prairie charged Brinkley Sargent, which also designed the park and the police building, with blending the aesthetics of these diverse elements to create an attractive, cohesive design for the Summit.

## Breaking the Mold

How do you build a facility to wow two dramatically different groups of seniors? Ultimately, the answer for Grand Prairie was quite straightforward: split the building in half. The 56,500-square-foot Summit is essentially designed to create two distinct, albeit connected, environments. One side houses facilities for more athletically inclined adults: the workout room, the saltwater lap pool with exercise vortex, a gymnasium, a yoga and aerobics studio, and more. The other side caters to those who prefer their recreation sweat-free, offering craft and game rooms, a pottery center, a teaching kitchen, an 88-seat movie theater, a café and ballrooms. Outside is a resort-worthy patio, bar and gaming area that connects to the boardwalk rimming the lake.

Of course, members are free to drift between the two sides, tasting the best of both worlds. But they aren't forced to mix their *hanging out* with *working out*.

This next generation of senior center opens another unique opportunity from the design standpoint, in that the interior materials and furnishings can be more ... “grown up.” After all, whole-family facilities are built with battleship toughness to withstand the destructive forces of rowdy kids. The Summit, on the other hand, with its gentler clientele, exudes the air of a posh hotel or a private club.

Case in point: the exercise room uses high-end, digitized workout equipment. The changing rooms feature wood lockers, granite finishes, and saunas. And the whole building is adorned with plants and flowers grown by members in the Summit’s on-site greenhouse. It’s a place where active adults can feel at home, or better.

In a new-aged facility with a holistic approach to wellness, environmental treatments must also play a role. Simply put, the Summit is green. With high standards for indoor air quality, energy-efficient lighting and mechanical systems, and water-conserving landscaping and aquatic features, the facility is designed to achieve LEED™ Gold certification pending its first full year of occupancy.

### **A Worthwhile Endeavor**

The grandeur of the Summit didn’t come without a cost, of course – it’s a \$23 million building. And other city governments with similar aspirations will want to know who’s footing the bill, and how. Grand Prairie funded the project with the continuation of a one-eighth-cent sales tax levy approved by voters. Ongoing costs will be supported by the parks and recreation budget, membership fees, and on-site revenues.

While the Summit is expected to draw 100,000 visitors annually, it’s impossible to put a number on the profound, long-term impact it could make beyond its walls. Active bodies and minds lead to improved physical and mental health for seniors, and an enhanced quality of life that the entire community can enjoy for many years to come.

*Stephen Springs is a principal at the award-winning firm of Brinkley Sargent Architects. Brinkley Sargent has been providing solutions to technically challenging projects requiring integrated management and design expertise for more than 35 years. Springs specializes in recreation and aquatic design, and was the project architect in the design of the Summit.*