

North Shore towns look to grow special recreation association

August 06, 2013 | By Gregory Trotter, Chicago Tribune reporter

The Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association provides recreational activities for people with disabilities in 13 North Shore communities. It's looking for a new home, and has a big plan to make that happen.

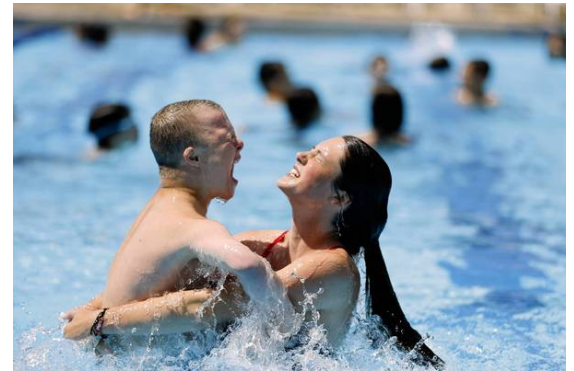
Citing inadequate facilities, undesirable location, and no room for growth, the NSSRA has hatched a \$4.6 million plan to move from its current location in a Northbrook industrial park. The group wants to move in with one of its partner agencies, comprising 10 park districts and three municipalities in communities such as Lake Forest, Highland Park, Deerfield, Wilmette and Glenview.

Officials say the move would raise the profile of the association, while providing more space for programming and storage.

While no community has yet raised its hand to house NSSRA, park directors have shown strong early support for the plan — despite increased costs for a projected 25-year period. The special recreation association, among the first of its kind in the country, provides invaluable services for some of the community's most vulnerable and special citizens, park officials say.

"I look at them as an extension of our staff," said Liza McElroy, executive director of the Park District of Highland Park. "It would make complete sense to have them under our roof."

That said, it's too early to say if Highland Park has the space and inclination to extend such an invite, McElroy said. NSSRA Executive Director Craig Culp will present the plan to the Highland Park park board of commissioners on Aug. 13. From there, park officials will discuss how it fits into Highland Park's own 10-year strategic plan for facilities and programming.



Abby Joyce jumps up and down in the water with 17-year-old Kyle Radulovic at the Hidden Creek Aquapark in Highland Park. Radulovic, along with more than a dozen others, attends the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association summer camp. Joyce works at the camp. (Stacey Wescott, Chicago Tribune)

Highland Park could be a good geographical fit for NSSRA, whose boundaries extend north to Lake Bluff and south to Wilmette. The geographical center of the service area includes Glenview, Northbrook, Northfield, Deerfield, and southern and western Highland Park, Culp said.

Because NSSRA has no taxing authority, the association will depend on its partners to raise about \$3.2 million of the projected \$4.6 million for a new facility over a 25-year period. Private donations and the sale of the current Northbrook building will help make up the rest.

The association offers recreational activities that range from camping to yoga to competitive sports — for both adults and children with disabilities. Last year, it served more than 1,600 people. In addition to camps and activities, NSSRA also provides certified staff and training for "inclusionary" programs offered by the park districts themselves.

"Everything you see a park district do, we do, too," Culp said. "We're the park district for folks with disabilities."

Using Wilmette as an example, there were 113 residents who signed up for a total of 617 activities in 2012. Wilmette pays NSSRA about \$225,000 a year for member agency contribution, based on a formula that factors in a community's population and the amount of property taxes it can access. Separate from the formula, Wilmette paid another \$200,000 for support with the inclusion programs, an amount that is simply a payment of services provided by NSSRA.

Under NSSRA's plan to raise money for a new facility and other capital needs, such as technology, Wilmette would pay an average of \$20,000 more per year. That might mean a higher tax levy, said Steve Wilson, executive director of the Wilmette Park District. But it's absolutely worth it.

"An additional (\$20,000) per year to make sure we better serve people in Wilmette with special needs is exactly in line what we should do," Wilson said. "It is a big plan. But the board and staff have taken the right direction with this."

The NSSRA board of directors consists of the various park directors, like Wilson and McElroy, and other municipal leaders. That should help guide the process as NSSRA seeks approval from 13 different boards at different intervals in the process.

Dan Peterson, Glenview Park District commissioner and the district's liaison to NSSRA,

said he believes the acquisition plan is well-thought-out and fair.

Glenview contributed about \$424,000 to NSSRA in 2012. The new facility plan will require the district to set aside on average an extra \$31,000 annually — the largest contribution out of the 13 partners. Peterson said the extra money NSSRA is trying to gather is spread out over a long period of time and shouldn't be of a concern to the district.

"It's really not a dramatic increase," Peterson said. "We're pleased to be able to contribute."

As far as the location for the new NSSRA headquarters, Peterson said if officials found space near the highway in Glenview, NSSRA is welcome to move in.

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Without the NSSRA, Lake Forest would not be able to offer many recreational services to its special-needs residents, said Mary Van Arsdale, director of Parks, Recreation and Forestry in Lake Forest. Lake Forest pays about \$200,000 a year to be part of the group, she said, and the city will only pay an additional \$14,000 annually for the increased building costs.

The council will take up the plan this fall, and Van Arsdale doesn't predict many problems with the plan.

"No one community has enough of a specific need to get the volume for each program," she said. "I think the NSSRA has a reputation, and the plan is reasonable. ... I think you'll find tremendous support."

On a recent afternoon at the Hidden Creek AquaPark in Highland Park, a group of teenagers splashed in the water and sat contentedly in the sunshine. Among them, they had disabilities such as autism, cerebral palsy, Down's Syndrome and seizure disorders. In a 1-to-1 ratio with the participants, NSSRA staff played with them, helped them and encouraged as much independence as possible.

Michael Wolf, 18, of Glenview, sat by the pool, drying in the sun. He was hit by a car

when he was 18 months old and subsequently diagnosed with intractable epilepsy second to brain injury. He's tube fed and diapered, his mother said, but has benefitted from being outdoors.

"NSSRA has offered him way more than we'd be capable of doing by ourselves," said Judy Wolf, his mother. "He can do things and be outside with friends."

For participants like Wolf, progress is incremental but inspiring to behold, said Bill Cline, a certified NSSRA staff member.

"To me, a breakthrough is a person learning to unscrew his water bottle," said Cline, of Glencoe. "Any step toward independence is what I like to see."

Number of people served by the NSSRA

Deerfield -- 153

Glencoe -- 53

Glenview -- 249

Highland Park -- 267

Highwood -- 18

Kenilworth -- 8

Lake Bluff -- 74

Lake Forest -- 45

Northbrook -- 331

Northfield -- 19

Riverwoods -- 18

Wilmette -- 113

Winnetka -- 43

Out of district -- 148

Total -- 1539

**Numbers provided by NSSRA for 2012.*

Tribune reporters Alexandra Chachkevitch and Kate Jacobson contributed to the story.

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