

# City residents dive into YMCA pool talks

By JAIME ANTON  
The Post staff writer

It is crystal clear that residents want to tread the waters of an eight-lane pool.

This was voiced by several community members who attended Tuesday night's first committee of the whole meeting. This new committee was formed by council to allow open dialogue among YMCA representatives, council, administration and residents.

"We wanted to hear from you," said Council President Vince Gentile. "We wanted the Y to hear from you, the administration to hear from you. This is your Y. The city property is your property. We wanted you to be part of the decision making process here and work with the Y before this goes out to bid. So, when it's done and you walk in, you know what you're walking into."

More than 40 residents and nonresidents attended and were brought up to speed on the city's plans to purchase the Avalon Event Center and allow YMCA to renovate that building to operate a facility there.

The first piece is council's formal adoption of the operating agreement with the YMCA and the purchase agreement for the Avalon. Law Director Tom Kelly said he hopes to have an agreement in council's hands for adoption shortly after Tuesday's council meeting. So it's likely at May's first meeting that agreement would be ratified by council.

This will allow the YMCA to move forward with its selection process for an architect. Although a rough conceptual rendering has been drawn up showing the facility's potential, nothing is set in stone.

Gary Guzy, executive director of the Ridgewood YMCA, as well as Jody Shy, campaign coordinator for the YMCA of Greater Cleveland, both listened attentively to every suggestion from residents and took notes throughout the meeting.

The North Royalton Family YMCA is expected to house a state-of-the-art gym, a pool, meeting rooms and offer several programs for all age groups.

"In the city of North Royalton, we know there's a need for family programming. ... We also know there's a need for fitness and aquatics here, so that's going to



A number of residents turned out to be involved in the process of planning out the new YMCA in town. Photo by JAIME ANTON

be our priority for this facility," Guzy said.

The Ridgewood facility partners with Parma Community General Hospital to allow cardiac patients to utilize the YMCA for their rehabilitation needs. Talks are ongoing with the hospital to partner in some fashion with the Y.

Guzy said he's also aware there's a need for senior, as well as youth programming. He added that the YMCA of today goes above and beyond the traditional gym and swim.

"We want this YMCA to be a community center. We want everybody to feel welcome. We want it to be your wellness destination. The YMCA has a mission, and it's not a gym and swim. It's really to develop youth, develop families and really develop the community as a whole," Guzy said.

Aquatics is a big concern with this site.

"Of course, we know there's a huge aquatics program out here. Right now North Royalton High School uses the Ridgewood Y. We would love for them to have their own facility, build a top-notch facility for them," Guzy said.

Steve Wood, a North Royalton resident who has had extensive experience coaching professional swimming, said the city's swim team is a jewel that needs to be showcased with a great pool.

"We really have something special. We have a tremendous dynasty that's on the verge of being created," he said.

North Royalton's swim coach Adri-

anne Smith agreed and said that a pool really impacts the city.

"It's very crushing to see that we have this opportunity and to not take full advantage of it. We are on the verge of something great," she said.

Ward 1 Councilman John Nickell said the community will benefit greatly from hosting aquatic events at the Y. Events will draw people in, he said, who otherwise would not come to the community.

"They're going to stop at Drug Mart, they're going to go to the local retailers. So the Y is more than just health and wellness. People will come in and see our community and say, 'hey, I want to build a house here', or 'hey, I want to bring my business here.'"

Others wanted to know that the YMCA would take steps to be as green with its renovations as possible; how it would handle scheduling of programs; if pedestrian accessibility would be improved; and others suggested that council go visit similar YMCA facilities so that they have a better grasp on this project.

Kim O'Farrell, a North Royalton resident who is deputy director and aquatics director at Fairview Park's Gemini Center, said she was concerned that the proposed 50,000-square-foot facility may be too small, especially if it will draw the expected crowd from area communities. Fairview Park's rec center is 93,000 square feet and is a resident-only facility that services the community's 17,000

residents.

"We are busting at the seams. What scares me, is it big enough to handle the community?" she said.

North Royalton has about 33,000 residents.

Most everyone at the meeting seemed very supportive of the center.

Mayor Bob Stefanik said he is more than excited.

"This is truly something special in the last 20 years in North Royalton, and this can define our community for many years to come. I see it as a start of a lot of good things to would happen to North Royalton in the future," he said.

Nickell said it's comforting to know that the YMCA has recently constructed three similar facilities in the area.

"That's one reason the city likes this. (The YMCA has) been there, they're going to handle most of the construction of the Y, they know how to construct a Y and it will be a nice partnership and that's one thing that's encouraging," he said.

The city plans to purchase the Avalon for \$2.1 million. It is funding this from a capital improvement fund and a capital recreation fund. It is also fronting the estimated \$6.5 million the YMCA needs to renovate the facility. The YMCA is in the midst of fundraising efforts to raise this money to pay back the city.

Gentile said this is a turning point for the city.

"I really feel that if we can make this happen, it's not done yet so I use the word if, that this will bring a new identity to this community. The only identity we truly have is that gazebo sitting out there on the green," he said.

Jimmy Hanrahan, a resident, said he doesn't want to see the project rushed, that it may need time to steep to ensure that it is done right.

"If it needs to sit on the back burner to do it right, like the eight lanes, which to me that should be mandatory," he said. "The pool should be the heart. If we need to sit back, then we sit back. As long as we're holding hands and the agreement was made, then put it on the back burner. Just make sure it's done right."

The next committee meeting will be hosted at 7 p.m. May 11.