Capital project funding is an ongoing reality for private clubs and it is virtually guaranteed to foster discussion and debate among the various “communities of interest” within a club’s membership. Usually, club members take a conservative approach to deploying those funds and focus habitually on restoration and rehabilitation of facilities that have been a part of members’ club experience. However, at perhaps no time in its history, has the private club industry faced so many influences that force it to embrace nontraditional policies, activities and relationships. “Wellness” is a compelling, unifying and forward-looking planning principle to guide those deliberations and brings with it the possibility for a “new birth” of the membership experience. The drumbeat of change is steady and louder now than it has ever been; renovation projects bring with them the opportunity to consider carefully and wisely how to innovate as well as rejuvenate the club’s physical plant.

Fitness & Wellness

Looking beyond their current offerings, many clubs are seeing opportunities to invest capital funds in facilities that have not typically been offered in this realm but have strong appeal to their target demographics. Arguably, this imperative is nowhere more readily apparent than in the recreation/wellness opportunity that many clubs are embracing (see sidebar on page 35). For example, today’s private club member (and the prospective member) is likely to have an actual or an aspirational interest in physical fitness. Demographic data from the commercial health club industry show clearly that there is significant overlap between their customer profile and that of the modern private club member. In fact, even a casual look at members’ current habits will reveal the extent to which existing members are simultaneously members of commercial exercise facilities. Although this phenomenon has not been rigorously studied, many private clubs report that their own initial foray into the “fitness world” produced surprising success as they were quickly overwhelmed by members’ enthusiasm. Often times, this success comes despite the presence of well-regarded and conveniently located commercial fitness options in the surrounding market. This relates in a significant degree to the often-reported difference between the number of survey respondents who acknowledge the importance of regular exercise to overall physical wellbeing (typically between 70% and 90%) and the number who actually practice this habit in their own lives. The President’s Council on Physical Fitness reports that more than 80 percent of both adults and children do not get the enough exercised to meet the recommended guidelines. The evidence is clear that despite a thriving commercial effort, there is substantial untapped potential for private club fitness facilities to serve many of those not presently engaged as they feel they should be.

Easy Expansions

Private clubs can reach for the proverbial low-hanging fruit initially with a modest investment (and a contingency plan for the inevitable expansion) to meet member needs for fitness facilities. While a common complaint is that clubs create facilities that became too small quickly, the capital expenditures debate often results in a more modest approach—one that will have an easier path to approval. The Golf Performance Conditioning Center may be an interim step that can be taken by a golf-centric club with supportive members willing to fund a fitness facility. In simple terms, 250–300 square feet of space and a relatively modest $30,000 equipment expense can create a facility for far less cost than a general use fitness center—appealing to a large segment of the club’s membership and producing a strong revenue stream from private and semi-private training sessions given by a certified golf conditioning specialist. Additionally, non-golfers seeking personal fitness training can use this space. This proves to be a self-supporting beta test for the concept of fitness at these types of clubs with little initial impact on the capital expense picture.

Another easy investment option requires a dedicated, but flexible facility. Group exercise in its many forms has a committed following and requires a room with a cushioned floor surface, dedicated music system, mirrored walls and (typically) a class leader. The class “menu” for this facility normally includes aerobics,
circuit training, boot camp, Pilates and other vigorous class formats. Increasingly however, interest in yoga, tai chi and meditation classes is reaching new levels of popularity and offers more emphasis on relaxation and stress reduction than more demanding formats and, as a consequence, finds a following especially among older participants. A well-rounded program will offer a full range of class types and will make efforts to reach beyond female participation to men, sports enthusiasts of all types, older members, teens and even elementary school children. Clubs seeking to promote more family participation are having success with “Mommy & Me” classes aimed at toddlers and their mothers or family fitness classes designed to get the whole family unit into an exercise environment.

Spas

Spa services are another readily available option for clubs wishing to diversify the program and service offerings resulting from a renovation project. A 2013 survey by the American Massage Therapy Association reports that 21 percent of women and 11 percent of men had a massage in the preceding 12 months. Only 34 percent of respondents reported that “pampering” was their chief reason for getting a massage whereas, 43 percent cited a “medical or health reason” for getting their last massage. These reasons include pain management, soreness/stiffness/spasms, injury rehabilitation, or overall wellness.

Skin care (i.e., facials) is another spa service that can easily be accommodated in a club capital project (it takes place in the very same room as massages do but requires only a small complement of specialized equipment be added to the basic massage set-up). American Spa magazine reported in a 2012 survey that facials were the number one grossing service at day spas (as opposed to resort spas) ahead of massage, nails and salon services among others. The second most powerful contributor to revenue growth in day spas is referrals (much like private club membership itself) and there is substantial customer loyalty—two-thirds of their business is repeat customers.

While these data don’t paint an overwhelming picture of this opportunity, it’s worth noting the “heart” of this consumer group overlaps significantly with that of the new member prospect in the private club industry. It is also true that, like fitness, many private club members are purchasing spa services from outlets in their general area and they can be counted upon to at least give these same services coming to their club a trial. The International Spa Association’s latest consumer profile shows that just under half of spa patrons are men and that more than two-thirds are employed at the managerial level or higher with a similar number earning more than $50,000 per year. According to the Day Spa Association, 75 percent of day spa patrons are over age 30 with 39 percent age 31–50. It should also be noted that, by their very nature, spa services are not self-administered and entail a fee (with a portion received by the club) each time a service occurs. Add to this the gross revenue from an occupied spa treatment room (120 square feet each that costs between $2,000 and $6,000 to equip) runs between $75 and $150 per hour and one can quickly see that a relatively small investment has excellent investment return potential. Also note that the above does not constitute a recommendation to embrace hair or other salon services, which are either low margin or need a larger customer base to prosper.

Health Programming

Although most components of a person’s health care will remain with the personal physician or other conventional health care facilities, there is a role for some parts of these resources within the club. Where the law allows, many clubs are seeing value in providing space for local physical therapists to offer services at the club—often in a space adjoining the fitness center. The trend toward more self-responsibility in maintaining good health has spawned another popular offering in the health education arena. Going by a name such as “The Doctor is In,” clubs are offering periodic health education sessions conducted by a physician or other health professional. Usually, there is a pre-determined topic in which the presenter is an expert (e.g., skin care, heart health).
disease, optimal nutrition, back pain prevention, etc.) and the sessions include ample time for questions and answers. These sessions play quite well in an era where there is much more emphasis on being a well-informed consumer of health care services. There is often a role for individual attention from one of these health care professionals like a nutritionist who might make themselves available by appointment to individual members. For cases like this, a simple private office/consultation room may be all the accommodation that’s necessary.

**Serving Families**

American families are more pressed for “together” time than ever before. Dual income families in particular experience a time deficiency, which can undermine family bonding that formerly occurred at mealtimes or while simply relaxing at home. Thus, they value opportunities that the club can provide to be together in a relaxed setting that contributes immensely to their collective quality of life. Family services that are gaining traction among forward-thinking clubs run the gamut from family-friendly dining facilities to pre-season sports conditioning for teens to preschooler babysitting and vacation day camp experiences for primary school age children. From a facility perspective (and necessarily a capital project one), these types of services may not require a large investment in facilities. The marginal cost of adding a child-minding facility to a capital project (for example, 350 square feet of space with storage, play furniture and a contiguous restroom) may not add a great deal to the cost of a new facility, but it can provide an invaluable service to a parent who has a preschooler but still wants to meet friends at the club to socialize, eat or work out.

Another example from elsewhere in the age spectrum: As children gain greater independence at a younger age, more age-specific programs, services and spaces are called for. A teen or “tween” club, properly designed and equipped, can be a home away from home for adolescents who seem to prize one another’s company above everything and make a visit to the club for a time-strapped family something to look forward to for this age group. Holiday/vacation times can be a serious predicament for parents in the modern family. Clubs have a golden opportunity in this case to provide a day camp experience that is both enriching for the child and a relief for their parents. Often, these activities can utilize existing tennis courts, swimming pools, parts of the club grounds and even parking lots to positive affect when engaging these children. However, increasingly, multi-function activity rooms that lend themselves to arts and crafts, video gaming, dancing, tumbling, birthday parties and study hall are coming to clubs seeking to do more than merely accommodate families. Today, dual income households comprise 40 percent of the top 1 percent of the American population; further down the economic ladder, the dual income percentage comes close to doubling. Thus, families in the private club demographic have far less flexibility to facilitate children’s participation in a variety of non-school activities than ever before. Simply put, the imperative for clubs is to do more than just accommodate children. They should proactively offer services and programs aimed at them.

**Water Recreation**

The club’s swimming pool area is another renovation/innovation opportunity. While swimming pools have been a fixture at private clubs for many years, the industry’s emerging customer profile suggests some new directions for renovating this traditional family-friendly facility. The newest and most successful pool facilities are actually an outdoor family activity center with one or more bodies of water as central (but not the only) features. Summer age-group swim teams have been a part of club life for a long time, but with more families and school age children as part of the membership mix, something more is necessary. For example, while many pool complexes feature a shallow tot or baby pool, many clubs when renovating are converting these to splash pads or “spraygrounds.” Kids can enjoy the water without being experienced swimmers while parents (and insurance companies!) like the extremely low risk of drowning accidents. With the increasing number of children in these pool environments comes an elevated “chaos” factor that can be irksome to members past the child-raising phase of their lives. This
Among the many buzzwords on the American scene today, certainly one of the most frequently heard is “wellness.” Woven throughout the many definitions of the term is the notion that there exists a state of being that is more than simply freedom from disease or dysfunction, and is characterized by self-responsibility to create balance and harmony among many different aspects of human life. Though various proponents’ lists differ, there is widespread agreement that this state of being goes well beyond the physical and includes our psychological, social and even spiritual condition. A typical list includes things like optimal nutrition, good mental health, regular recreation & leisure, routine preventive medical care, healthy level of exercise, an active and supportive social network, positive relationships with family, meaningful spiritual practice, rewarding/challenging work, and fiscal and logistical provisions for physical security in daily life (i.e., food, clothing and shelter). Given Americans’ new focus on their health and wellbeing, clubs can seize this opportunity to provide thoughtful amenities that make themselves a wellness center.

Traditionally, private clubs have played a role in a number of these wellness components offering members dining, ample socializing opportunities and the enjoyment of recreational activities (e.g., golf, boating, racquet sports, swimming, etc.). More recently, forward-thinking clubs have broadened the membership experience to include fitness facilities, more casual dining, family programming, liberalized dress and personal technology rules, massage and other personal care services, and other facets of the membership experience that reflect contemporary American life. Is it then, too far a reach to envision the private club of the future being the single greatest source of wellness in a person’s life? Perhaps not.

Granted, the locus of a member’s religious life will probably always be the place of worship and the community that is found there. Remedial health care will still come from physicians, hospitals and HMOs. And, it seems unlikely that the club would play much of a role developing a member’s financial stewardship. However, even though the medical role of a club in a member’s life is less than comprehensive, might the availability of physical therapy and chiropractic services on-site be valuable? The same might be true of hospital-provided health education classes for members. Ironwood Country Club (Palm Desert, Calif.) has both of those elements in place as a regular part of their offerings to the membership.

Wouldn’t more programming for children and for families at the club boost the strength of family relationships along with the wellbeing of its individual members? In California, Palo Alto Hills Golf & Country Club would likely answer “yes” as it has a significant investment in a fitness/spa/family recreation facility that opened in 2007. Couldn’t chef-taught cooking classes for homemakers and even children make for better diets and sharper health consciousness among the young? Willoughby Golf Club (Stuart, Fla.) offers cooking classes taught by the chef on heart-healthy and gluten-free cooking that have been very successful.

As clubs seek to establish stronger ties to current members and appeal to future members, their thinking will naturally move toward a vision of the membership experience that is broader and deeper than it has ever been before. “Wellness” is a concept big enough and compelling enough to guide those thoughts and to capture the imagination of the club member of the future.