

The International Council on Active Aging®

DEVELOPER'S **guide** 2006

Designing, building and equipping an age-friendly wellness center



THE CONCEPT

Define your wellness center concept Conceptual planning lays the foundation for success. **Enduring concepts** Developers reveal key lessons learned. **Buy-in for wellness** How to gain support for your initiative.



Defining your

The clubhouse is a popular and visually appealing feature at one of Slenker Land Corporation's Central Parke communities.



wellness center concept

The conceptual planning of wellness amenities and facilities is essential to project development, yet often organizations give it too little attention, notes this industry consultant

by Gary Henkin, BS

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Defining your wellness center concept

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The conceptual planning of your clubhouse, spa, wellness center or community amenities is among the most critical phases of the project development process. Many decisions made in this stage ultimately influence the project's success as a whole, yet conceptual planning is commonly underemphasized and misunderstood.

In designing a fitness center or recreation complex for a setting such as a retirement community, many developers simply allocate a designated amount of space to the master plan; however, they often fail to tie the intended scope and function of this facility to the community's overall concept. This is a significant missed opportunity. A well-planned wellness center or leisure complex can entice the consumer, while producing lasting memories that deliver a community's *lifestyle promise*.

With other settings such as commercial health clubs and wellness centers, a well-defined concept allows the developer to maintain a concentrated effort on meeting the needs of the target market, instead of making the common mistake of trying to be something for everyone.

Investing the time, energy and resources to create a clearly defined conceptual plan for your amenities or facility will give your project a focus that is vital for success.

A conceptual plan serves as a project's touchstone. It creates the intent and purpose that guide the decision-making process throughout the life of the development. A comprehensive plan can transform a building of brick and mortar into an *experience*, engaging current consumers and attracting new ones.

The team members selected to help create your conceptual plan should

include the project manager, architectural and interior design firm, marketing and sales team, and the individuals or outside company (if applicable) that will eventually operate the facility. Each of these team members offers a different perspective and brings a specific talent to the table. Skillfully aligning the vision of this plan and utilizing the knowledge and experience of these individuals will build a solid foundation for your project from concept to completion.

The core elements of a conceptual plan

A complete conceptual plan for your wellness center will address the core elements listed below:

- identity and positioning
- market research
- resource allocation and budget development
- theme and storyline creation
- space programming and design
- soft programming

The sections that follow describe these elements and what conceptual planning involves for each.

Identity and positioning

Establishing a unique identity in the marketplace is crucial to the development of your wellness center. Are you seeking to become the leader in luxury living for the active adult market, or are you creating affordable housing within the convenience of a master planned community? Or are you aiming to carve out a niche as *the* age-friendly fitness center for adults in your neighborhood? Crafting a brand identity or establishing a new market within your existing brand requires careful planning to be meaningful and effective.

In your search to further define your project, consider the following questions:

- What can you provide that will differentiate your facility or property from the competition?
- What is important to the age group you are targeting?
- How will your amenities effectively address the 6 dimensions of wellness: intellectual, social, physical, emotional, spiritual and vocational?

Market research and community profile

Undoubtedly, it is possible to spend a great deal of time and money on market research if you plan to develop a community or wellness facility. As you work with your marketing team to pull statistics and develop surveys, remember to include questions that will help identify which amenities will influence the buying decisions of your consumer.

The amenities provided in master planned communities and commercial wellness centers have become more diverse, so you want to make sure you ask the right questions. For example, simply asking if an individual wants a fitness center may prove insufficient, as that question may conjure thoughts of an unstaffed, dark and dusty fitness room with one treadmill and an old multistation weight machine. Instead, ask people if they would like a wellness center with state-of-the-art fitness equipment and programming. Asking more specific questions will allow you to capture the interests of your prospective buyers more accurately.

Creating a consumer and community profile is just as important to developing your wellness center, as it is to determining the style and theme of the homes to build in a retirement community. For other settings, a consumer profile is key to creating the spaces and places that will attract the membership base that you desire. The most influential pieces of information to gather and understand include:



The Clubhouse at Southshore Falls, a Centex Homes community in west Florida, is a state-of-the-art facility for residents.

Age range. Understanding your target market's age range will have a significant impact on your wellness center concept. In the spectrum of aging, there is a tremendous difference in the needs of adults ages 55–65 years versus those of the 70-plus age group. Using this information effectively can have an impact on decisions such as your equipment selection, space program, and menu of services and programs.

Average household income. The household income of your consumer can determine the types of services that individuals consider important. For example, will this market be interested in luxurious spa services and wellness programs? This information may also help you to determine how much funding will be available to subsidize the operation of the wellness center.

Leisure and recreational preferences. Capturing information on your consumer's leisure and recreational preferences will shape the size and scope of the amenities and facilities included in your space program. Whether you gather information through surveys or

focus groups, it is important that you understand how individuals will choose to spend their time.

Size of the community at build out. For developers of communities, knowing the estimated number of units within the community at build out will drive the size and number of amenities developed. For instance, one central wellness center may meet the needs of a community of 700 units or less, while a larger community may consider a series of pocket parks and more tailored neighborhood amenities.

Resource allocation and budget development

Your conceptual plan needs to be based on the resources available for the overall project. Real or imposed limitations to resources exist and must be clearly understood, before too much time is dedicated to creating unsustainable concepts. Some questions you could ask yourself when analyzing your resources include:

- How much space on our site plan do we have to devote to community amenities or the wellness center?

- How much can we afford to spend on the development and construction of these facilities?
- What will the long-term operating costs be?
- Will we staff our facility during all or a portion of the operating hours?
- Will we include any services or programs in the homeowner or membership dues?
- Will we be able to offset operating costs by allowing outside memberships and program participation?
- Can we develop strategic partnerships with local universities or institutions that may share resources and space with our residents?

Theme and storyline creation

Your community or facility should tell a *story*. Your story should communicate the mission and vision of your facility, while appealing to the consumer on a uniquely personal level. The story provides a script that describes the essence of the products and services

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unique to the facility, while presenting the benefits that will attract your target market.

Your project should have a common thread and theme that defines this story and creates a sense of place, providing emotional value to the consumer. You can bring this story to life each day through the delivery and alignment of services with physical spaces and operational detail.

A carefully developed theme has defining elements, signature services and programs, and a unique identity that engages the consumer on a personal and emotional level. (Figure 1 on page 14 offers a branding sample that illustrates the different elements chosen by one

organization to define and reinforce its theme.) This theme should inspire a sense of belonging and familiarity in your consumer, while encouraging a meaningful interpretation personalized by the listener. A theme should be simple yet majestic in incorporating myths and folklore steeped in history and modern relevance, making it as much a part of the community or facility experience as the landscape and scenery. A good story evokes a sense of ownership and kindles the desire to retell it.

But developing the theme and storyline (or narrative) of your community and/or wellness center involves much more than an exercise in creative writing and imaginative marketing materials.

This effort requires you to define the daily interactions and *touchpoints* that create a truly memorable experience for the consumer. (Touchpoints are the points of contact between the individual and your programs and services.)

The wellness center can provide the perfect creative platform to animate your story. In these spaces and places, individuals will connect with each other and with the community or facility *lifestyle* as a whole, so the wellness center should embody your story.

The outline on page 16 may help you in creating the *table of contents* for your

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A billiards room/sports lounge invites residents of Southshore Falls to play games and socialize.

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facility's storyline. A table of contents provides the structure and flow needed to create a complete picture for your audience. You can enhance the selection of these elements through creative logos, name and brand alliances consistent with the theme, and design inspirations for each space.

Space programming and facility design

Once you have identified your story's defining elements, you can give this wish list to your design consultants or architectural firm for space programming and design. This program provides a detailed size and space

allocation, including quantities of assigned space, square footage, recommended adjacencies, and equipment recommendations. By considering the activities, services and operational elements provided within each facility, a functional design is born.

The Spa at the Inn of the Mountain Gods		Santa Fe, New Mexico	
Defining attributes and spa theme	Design elements	Service elements	Signature treatments
<p>A discovery and affirmation that the sacredness of all living things and the inner peace which can be realized by connecting in the present moment with wisdom and beauty of nature as it is understood and practiced in the Mescalero Apache culture.</p> <p>Mescalero Apache American Indian influences.</p> <p>Focus on the natural cyclical patterns of life.</p> <p>References to Medicine Wheel themes.</p> <p>Spa Wheel of Power including: Insight, Cleansing, and Transformation.</p>	<p>Locker Rooms referred to as "lodges."</p> <p>Saunas referred to as "sweat lodges."</p> <p>Spa lounge with photos of Rocky Mountain scenery, scents of pine, sage and juniper.</p> <p>A fire pit with stones to mark each of the 4 directions.</p> <p>A water feature recessed into the walls with cascading rain drops.</p> <p>Wind Harps in the outdoor entry garden to the spa.</p> <p>Celestial sky treatment rooms featuring moon and star ceiling treatments.</p> <p>Each treatment room named for a specific constellation.</p>	<p>Guests are warmly greeted with Apache words of "welcome" and "blessings unto you."</p> <p>Spa journey begins with the first phase of "Insight," as the guests take a few minutes to complete a short questionnaire allowing therapists to focus on individual needs.</p> <p>Guests escorted to the appropriate "lodge" (locker room).</p> <p>After treatments, guests are encouraged to relax in the spa lounge in front of the fire pit.</p> <p>Herbal teas, juices, and fresh fruits of the season are provided to the guests.</p>	<p><i>Indigenous Plants:</i> Yucca (soapweed) Prickly pear cactus Agave cactus Sage Aloe Juniper Pine needles</p> <p><i>Apache Warm Stone Aromatherapy Massage</i></p> <p><i>Wheel of Power Spa Journey</i> – a full day spa package incorporating all 4 phases of the spa journey, concluding with a parting gift of an Apache teardrop "worry stone."</p> <p><i>Apache Clay Body Masque</i></p> <p><i>Apache Foot Treatment</i></p>
WTS International		Building better lifestyles.	

Copyright © The Spa at the Inn of the Mountain Gods. Used with permission.

Figure 1. Branding sample

CAPTURING THE WELLNESS CONCEPT THROUGH PROGRAMS AND SERVICES					
Social	Physical	Emotional	Intellectual	Spiritual	Vocational
Clubs & groups parties	Strength training	Personal care programs	Workshops	Meditation	Volunteer programs
Community traditions	Balance & stability	Stress management	Continuing education	Mind/body classes	Career services
Concerts in the park	Nutritional programming	Support groups	Book clubs	Communing with nature	Retirement planning
Art festivals	Group exercise	Programs to promote belonging	Trivia	Spa services	Community services
Happy hours	Yoga & pilates	Fostering independence	Cooking classes	Relaxation	
Meet & greet socials	Water exercise & swimming	Journaling	Arts & crafts	Gardening	
Themed holiday parties	Walking programs	Creative expression	Travel	Exploration	
Wine tastings	Music & dance		Museum tours		
			Lecture series		

Figure 2. Capturing the wellness concept through programs and services

A well-defined concept will become the driving force behind the logistics of the space program and the facility design. This concept is the blueprint from which your story blends seamlessly into the form and function of the building.

Soft programming and staff training

Connecting your story with lifestyle practices and program offerings is essential in the overall delivery of the concept. The services and products you provide to your consumers will influence how they interpret the story and shape the impact of the experience.

Orchestration of the personal interactions of your staff with the delivery of services can ultimately affect consumer interest and participation levels, as well as the viability of your investment in the product. An interaction as simple as the customer greeting or facility tour must be carefully trained, to recognize the full benefit of the

experience. Staff members must not only be able to tell the story of your facility, but also to bring it to life through their daily interactions with the customer. Execution is the most challenging phase of the conceptual development process, and it serves to distinguish between the good and the truly great.

Through soft programming, you have the unique opportunity to create brand-specific or individualized traditions. Traditions are what the consumer yearns to return to and treasure. Traditions create stability and consistency in our everchanging world; they are a piece of history captured and retold throughout generations. The traditions of families, holidays and communities hold memories of delight and inspiration. Whether these traditions include an annual Independence Day celebration, a monthly fitness challenge, a fundraising event for a local charity, or a family fun day, each experience creates a continual sense of excitement and anticipation.

Your menu of services and programs should reflect your concept and link people’s experiences with the story that they will want to live and tell. By using the 6 dimensions of wellness as a guide, hiring capable and highly motivated staff, and through delivery of diverse programs and services, you can create a wellness center that transforms your story into the fabric and culture of the community or facility itself. (See Figure 2 on this page for examples of how to capture the wellness concept through programs and services.)

Developing a remarkable wellness facility

Defining a wellness center concept can prove a daunting task for even the most experienced developer or owner. This effort requires the discipline of planning, the patience to endure the rigor of the creative process, and the tenacity never to settle for mediocrity.

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In a cookie-cutter world of advanced technology and *systematic efficiencies*, today's consumer continuously searches for something special and memorable with which they can find an emotional connection and familiar simplicity. Capturing this experience in the essence of the wellness center is a journey requiring the navigation of a talented crew united in their desire to create something remarkable.

A community or facility is often defined by the lifestyle it inspires and the people

it attracts. Conceptual planning provides the foundation and the attention to detail that creates the fertile soil from which great communities and facilities grow and prosper. ☺

As President and Founder of WTS International, Gary Henkin, BS, has more than 30 years of experience in the planning, design and management of health clubs, spas and athletic facilities of all types. WTS International is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing leisure consulting and operating firms. At present,

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Images courtesy of WTS International

Creating a storyline for your community or wellness center

The suggested table of contents below provides an outline for each chapter of your storyline. Compiling this information will allow you to create a solid foundation for your concept and theme by addressing the structural elements of your facility, as well as the desired utilization. This storyline provides the design and operations team with a unified vision of your facility's scope and function.

1. Defining themes

- a. history
- b. climate, vegetation and terrain
- c. culture

2. Design elements—signature spaces

- a. landscaping and architecture
- b. interior design, furniture and fixtures
- c. outdoor facilities:
 - gardens
 - walking paths
 - amphitheaters and gazebos
 - event fields
 - pocket parks
 - resort-style pools with lap lanes

- whirlpools
 - waterfront activities
 - wooded areas and hiking paths
 - sports fields
 - dog parks
 - intergenerational playgrounds
 - tennis courts
 - golf courses
 - bocce ball
- d. indoor facilities:

- fitness center
- cardio equipment
- strength equipment
- group exercise studio
- pilates and yoga
- functional training space
- cardio entertainment
- locker rooms
- sauna and/or steam rooms
- indoor pools
- therapy pools
- full-service spa
- spa treatment rooms
- café or coffee bar
- fine arts studio
- social hall or ballroom
- card and game room
- meeting rooms for clubs/groups

- billiards/sports lounge
- library
- life enrichment center

3. Signature services and programs

- a. fully staffed during operating hours to provide complete customer care
- b. signature spa treatments using products indigenous to the area
- c. personalized wellness programs
- d. rolled towels on each piece of cardio equipment
- e. infused waters and elixirs
- f. chilled towels outside the sauna and stream room
- g. eucalyptus aromatherapy in the steam room
- h. concierge services
- i. food and beverage services with signature menu items
- j. social and recreational programs
- k. community events and traditions
- l. life enrichment and continuing education
- m. wireless Internet access
- n. community Intranet