

Special Circumstances

Is the SRA boom of the '70s and '80s headed for a bust?



By John N. McGovern

onventional wisdom says "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." But there are times when you can see something breaking and can step in and save it, and this is one of those times.

We are talking about the award-winning model of providing recreation programs for people with disabilities: special recreation associations or SRAs. Political, social, and legal forces are

amassed and unless they are diverted, they will ruin the special recreation association model. This article reviews those forces, and proposes some changes that could allow the 32-year-old special recreation association movement to thrive for another three decades.

1960s: Do it alone or do it together

In the late 1960s, park districts were asked with increasing frequency to provide recreation opportunities for children with disabilities. More and more families were seeing their children with disabilities receive education services in school districts and the popular question was "If the schools can do it, why can't the park districts?"

Some park districts experimented with summer programs and the occasional bowling or social program. Adding to interest in this area, the Chicago Park District hosted the first Special Olympics competition in 1968 at Soldier Field.

In 1969, the park districts in the northern suburbs asked for help from the Illinois General Assembly. The Illinois Association of Park Districts supported the issue and worked with legislators and park district officials to solve the problem. Ultimately, the General Assembly created Section 8-10.1 of the Park District Code, which auth-

Photo by Brigid Buchert, Special Recreation Association of Central Lake County

rizes park districts to establish, maintain, and manage recreation programs for persons with all types of all disability. The statute authorizes park districts to provide transportation, hire professional employees, and to charge fees for these services. This was the important first step: establishing authority for park districts, acting alone, to provide recreation for people with disabilities.

But the problem was one of scope and size, not just authority. Even in large park districts of 50,000 or more residents, there were too few people with disabilities to provide adequate programs. The incidence of disability was even less in park districts with 10,000 or fewer residents. So the General Assembly, at the same time it established authority for park districts to act alone, granted legislative authority for park districts and municipalities to form special recreation partnerships. Section 8-10.2 provides that two or more park districts can join together for the express purpose of providing recreation programs for people with disabilities who live in the cooperating districts. The organizations, called special recreation associations or SRAs, have the same authority that a single park district has and can also own real property for the use of the special recreation association. Specifically, Section 8-10.2 provides the authority for individuals, municipalities, or park districts, to work together to maintain staff, to define the relationship between the various partners, to constitute a governing board, and to provide other requirements for operations of programs as are believed to be necessary. In the Municipal Code, Section 11-95-13, and 11-95-14, similar authority exists and was approved on May 29, 1969.

"It is a pretty simple idea," says Kevin Kendrigan, the executive direc-

tor of the Northwest Special Recreation Association, the largest of the 25 SRAs. "By cooperating, the partner communities can provide more service to their residents, at less cost to the taxpayer."

1970s and 1980s: Funding issues and answers spur SRA growth

Eager to serve their residents, park districts formed four special recreation associations within four years of the General Assembly's action, from 1970 to 1974. The Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association (NSSRA) was first, followed closely by the South Suburban Special Recreation Association (SSSRA).

"We knew this was a need, we just were not sure how to do it," says Mary Gregoire, director of the Olympia Fields Park District. "We knew we couldn't do it on our own, so as soon as the General Assembly gave us the ability to form an SRA we did."

In the first several years of their existence, the park district partnerships were funded with support from townships (using now-extinct federal Revenue Sharing funds) and park district

sources. Within three years it was clear that these sources were inadequate. It was equally clear that more park district partnerships would form if a stream of funding was available.

In 1975 the General Assembly acted again and established Section 5-8 of the Park District Code. This section authorized a

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park district that was a partner in a special recreation association to levy up to \$.02 per \$100 of equalized assessed valuation (EAV), pursuant to referendum by petition. It

Photo by Janet Plencher,
Northwest Special
Recreation Association



also restricted the expenditure of those funds to costs directly related to the costs of operating the special recreation association. The same authority was incorporated into the Municipal Code. This dedicated source of funds spurred an explosion in the number of communities receiving special recreation services. Between 1975 and 1980, park districts formed 15 special recreation associations. Five more were formed in the 1980s.

A little more than ten years later, park districts and special recreation associations were concerned about the growing demand for recreation for people with disabilities. More and more of the park districts and cities in special recreation agreements were at the \$.02 levy rate maximum and demand was rising faster than resources. In 1987 the General Assembly removed the referendum by petition requirement and doubled the allowable tax rate to \$.04. This

measure passed with the support of the Illinois Taxpayers Federation. The existence of this stable source of funds has benefitted hundreds of thousands of Illinois residents with disabilities. It also resulted in another surge in the creation of special recreation associations, with six more being created.

1990s: SRA growth slows to a stop

Up until this point, the history of special recreation associations in Illinois has been one of constant growth. The General Assembly acted in the interest of the public and at the request of the public and the park districts. SRAs won award after award at the national level. Then, things changed and not one special recreation association was created in the 1990s, and the number of communities joining special recreation associations slowed to a trickle.

Why?

One reason is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which has had a dramatic impact on the types of services that are being provided by special recreation associations in Illinois. The ADA became effective January 26, 1992. It requires that recreation programs be available for people with disabilities in the "most integrated setting." Among all the park districts in an SRA, between \$1,500,000 and \$2,000,000 is spent annually to support participation in recreation programs in the most integrated setting as required by the ADA.

"The impact of inclusion has been staggering for some of the partnerships," says Jane Hodgkinson, executive

director of the Western Du Page Special Recreation Association. "In three of the partnerships, a combined amount of more than \$1,000,000 annually is expended to meet high demand for inclusion. That \$1,000,000 has come from revenue that would otherwise have been expended for conventional recreation programs for persons with disabilities."

Another reason is that the model doesn't work as well in rural areas or less densely populated communities. In the metropolitan Chicago area or in developed areas like Rockford, Champaign-Urbana, and Peoria, communities are in close proximity and have enough population base to make the partnerships advantageous. However, in Macomb, Kewanee and Roxana, neighboring communities are too far away to make a partnership practical.

Indeed, it has become extremely difficult under the Property Tax Extension Limitation Act (or tax cap) for any new communities to enter into joint agreement programs. Since the tax cap became effective in 1991, only four communities have joined a special recreation partnership: the Village of Lincolnshire, the Village of Riverwoods, the Grayslake Area Park District, and just this April, the Village of Harwood Heights.

"The Village of Harwood Heights is a logical partner for us, being so close to Nornridge Park District and the Village of Elmwood Park," says Sandy Gbur, executive director of the West Suburban Special Recreation Association. "If the Village had not been a home rule municipality, this would have been a much more

difficult decision for the Village to make."

This is because under the Property Tax Extension Limitation Act, to provide the funds required to join a partnership requires taking those funds from other levies or other revenue sources, or passing a referendum. Many municipalities and park districts fear that because of the relatively small incidence of disability that a referendum question will fail.

2000s: The impact of medical technology, economics, and lawsuits

Today advances in medical technology save the lives of many newborns who just five years ago would have died. These children live on with disabilities and stay in the community. They demand services, including recreation. At the other end of the spectrum, doctors save more adults who experience traumatic injuries or conditions, and they too return to home and live with disabilities in the community.

As a result, many SRAs are facing very difficult financial times. As demand rises due to demographic reasons, and as the stable source of revenue shrinks because of the implementation of the tax cap, both the quality of service and the quantity of service are jeopardized. Each of the 26 existing special recreation associations reports one of these symptoms of problems ahead:

- deficit budgets
- program reductions
- service waiting lists
- employee reductions
- rapidly rising fees for service

Another stress on SRAs is a nationwide trend in court and adminis-



Photo by
Ann Lohrigan, IAPD

trative decisions to declare acts by units of local government to be discriminatory when people with disabilities don't receive appropriate service or when service is denied. From Bartington to San Francisco to New York, federal courts and hearing officers are forcing parks and recreation agencies to comply with ADA requirements, and no entity has successfully defended a case by claiming that it could not afford the service requested. Park districts that cry poor, pointing to the restrictions of the tax cap, will receive little sympathy in court.

2002: Searching for a solution

It is clear the current funding method for public recreation opportunities for people with disabilities is inadequate now. In three years, it will be a crisis. Continued service reductions, growing demand, growing waiting lists, and growing inclusion demands in communities where that demand has not yet evolved, will erode the stability of the special recreation associations.

The challenge today is to develop revenue streams that will provide for continued local support of people with disabilities, and to, where possible, revise the current system.

Says Terry Porter, director of the Wilmette Park District: "We have to think differently about SRAs. We either have to change the way they are funded, or change what they do, or consider cutting services provided by SRAs."

One suggestion is to ask the General Assembly to enact a once-only exemption that would permit a park district or non-home rule municipality to become a partner in an SRA by raising its tax levy above the aggregate. In subsequent years, the increased levy would be subject to the Property Tax Extension Limitation Act. This would enable communities not yet in a special recreation association to join one. Another suggestion is to exempt the Section 5-8 levy from the tax cap.

Another suggestion is to allow a unified referendum in all SRA communities. Present law would require each park district or city served by an SRA to hold separate referenda to increase

tax support for the SRA. Conducting six, ten, or fourteen referenda would be very difficult and unwieldy. But, holding one referendum across all six to fourteen communities would be more manageable and consistent with the intent of the tax cap.

Another suggestion is to seek state

better inclusion into the community. This solution is part of the legislative platform of the Illinois Association of Park Districts and the Illinois Park and Recreation Association.

Fees, too, are an issue. The ADA prohibits park districts and SRAs from charging people with disabilities fees that are higher than fees charged to people without disabilities for similar recreation programs. The challenge in a special recreation setting is to identify where fee revenue can be increased without having a discriminatory result.

Bottom line, recreation for people with disabilities is a park district issue, not an

SRA issue. The problems facing special recreation associations will be solved when park district elected officials and administrators treat it as a priority, not as an issue the "SRA people" are solving. Most communities want the same level of service or greater service for people with disabilities. So the trick in the next two years, to avoid a crisis, is to determine what that source of revenue will be. If we work together, we can "fix it" before it is broken. If we wait, we may never be able to fix it.

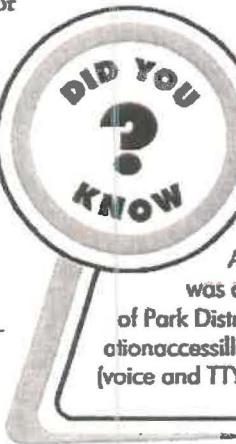
John McEvily is the executive director of the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association. A long-time member of the Joint Legislative Committee, he writes and speaks frequently about recreation and people with disabilities.



Since the tax cap became effective in 1991, only four communities have joined a special recreation partnership.

Photo by Becki Serrato, Joliet Park District

funds. The special recreation associations have been working together to become eligible for funds from the State of Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS). Many DHS program outcomes are identical to SRA outcomes: increased independence, better employability, acquisition of social skills, and



Recreation Access Illinois is a new resource for people with disabilities to learn where they can participate in recreation, fitness and sports activities. Funded by a grant from the Illinois Attorney General's Office, the resource was developed by the Illinois Association of Park Districts and Illinois SRAs. See www.recreationaccessillinois.org or call 800.900.8086 (voice and TTY).

SPECIAL RECREATION AGENCIES IN ILLINOIS

Champaign-Urbana Special Recreation
 1311 W. Church, Champaign, IL 61821
 217.398.2374 – 217.398.2375 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Champaign Park District, Urbana Park District

Fox Valley Special Recreation Association
 1 N. Lincolnway, North Aurora, IL 60542
 630.896.6066
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Batavia Park District, Fox Valley Park District, Geneva Park District, St. Charles Park District

Gateway Special Recreation Association
 15W431 59th St., Burr Ridge, IL 60527
 630.325.3857 – 630.325.9702 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Burr Ridge Park District, Countryside Recreation Department, Elmhurst Park District, Hinsdale Parks & Recreation, Oak Brook Park District, Pleasant Dale Park District, Westchester Park District, Willowbrook Parks and Recreation

Heart of Illinois Special Recreation Association
 8727 N. Pioneer Road, Peoria, IL 61615
 309.691.1929
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Morton Park District, Peoria Park District

Joliet-Bolingbrook Special Recreation Association
 230 E. Briarcliff Road, Bolingbrook, IL 60440
 630.739.1124 – 630.739.2287 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Bolingbrook Park District

Lincolnway Special Recreation Association
 329 W. Maple, P.O. Box 442, New Lenox, IL 60451
 815.485.9517
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Frankfort Park District, Mokena Community Park District, New Lenox Community Park District, Peotone Park District

Maine-Niles Association of Special Recreation (M-NASR)
 6820 Dempster Street, Morton Grove, IL 60053
 847.966.5522 – 847.966.8897 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Des Plaines Park District, Golf-Maine Park District, Lincolnwood Park and Recreation Department, Morton Grove Park District, Niles Park District, Park Ridge Recreation & Park District, Skokie Park District

Northeast DuPage Special Recreation Association (NEDSRA)
 1770 W. Centennial Place, Addison, IL 60101
 630.620.4500 – 630.620.7477 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Addison Park District, Bensenville Park District, Butterfield Park District, Glendale Heights Recreation Department, Itasca

Park District, Lombard Park District, Medinah Park District, Oakbrook Terrace Park District, Villa Park Recreation Department, Wood Dale Park District, York Center Park District

Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association (NISRA)
 820 E. Terra Cotta Ave., Ste. 125, Crystal Lake, IL 60014
 815.459.0737 – 815.459.0737 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Barrington Park District, Cary Park District, Crystal Lake Park District, Dundee Township Park District, City of Harvard, Morencro Park District, City of McHenry, Wauconda Park District, City of Woodstock

ows Park District, Salt Creek Park District, Schaumburg Park District, Streamwood Park District, Wheeling Park District

Oak Lawn Park District Special Recreation Cooperative
 4625 W. 110th St., Oak Lawn, IL 60453
 708.857.2200
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Bridgeview Park District, Burbank Park District, South and Central Stickney, Chicago Ridge Park District, Village of Evergreen Park, City of Hometown, Hickory Hills Park District, Oak Lawn Park District, Palos Hills Park District, Worth Township

River Valley Special Recreation Association
 801 W. Station, Kankakee, IL 60901
 815.933.7336
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Bourbonnais Township Park District, Kankakee Valley Park District, Limestone Township Park District

Rockford Park District, Therapeutic Recreation Services
 1401 N. Second St., Rockford, IL 61107-3086
 815.987.1614 – 815.987.1600 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Freeport Park District, Rockford Park District

South Suburban Special Recreation Association (SSSRA)
 P.O. Box 1097, Frankfort, IL 60423
 815.806.0384 - 815.806.0389 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Country Club Hills Park District, Frankfort Square Park District, Hazel Crest Park District, Homewood-Flossmoor Park District, Village of Matteson, Oak Forest Park District, Olympia Fields Park District, Village of Park Forest, Village of Richton Park, Tinley Park Park District

Southeast Association Special Parks & Recreation (SEASPAR)
 6000 S. Main St., Downers Grove, IL 60516
 630.960.1144
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Clarendon Hills Park District, Darien Park District, Downers Grove Park District, Village of Indian Head Park, Park District of LaGrange, Community Park District of LaGrange Park, Lisle Park District, Western Springs Recreation Department, Westmont Park District, Woodridge Park District

Southwest Special Recreation Association (SWSRA)
 12521 S. Kostner, Alsip, IL 60658
 708.389.9423
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Alsip Park District, Blue Island Park District, Justice Park District, Midlothian Park District, Palos Heights Recreation Department, Posen Park District, Summit Park District, Village of Merrionette Park



Special Recreation of Joliet & Channahon
 3000 W. Jefferson St., Joliet, IL 60435
 815.741.7275 ext. 169
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Channahon Park District, Joliet Park District

Special Recreation Association of Central Lake County (SRACLC)
 290 Oakwood, Vernon Hills, IL 60061
 847.816.4866 – 847.816.4866 TTY
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Grayslake Community Park District, Mundelein Park and Recreation District, Village of Indian Creek, Village of Lake Zurich, Village of Libertyville, Village of Lincolnshire, Vernon Hills Park District

Special Recreation Services
 1624 E. 154th Street, Dolton, IL 60419
 708.841.4034
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Calumet Memorial Park District, Dolton Park District, Lan-Oak Park District, Riverdale Park District, South Holland Recreation Department

Special Recreation Services of Northern Lake County (SRSNLC)
 2200 East Grass Lake Road, Lindenhurst, IL 60046
 847.356.6011

814 Hart Rd., Round Lake, IL 60073
 847.546.8558

2000 Belvidere Rd., Waukegan, IL 60085
 847.360.4762

2400 Dowie Memorial Dr., Zion, IL 60099
 847.746.5500

MEMBER AGENCIES: Lindenhurst Park District, Round Lake Area Park District, Waukegan Park District, Zion Park District

Tri-County Special Recreation Association
 16028 127th Street, Lemont, IL 60439
 630.257.6787
 MEMBER AGENCIES: Lemont Park District, Lockport Township Park District, Village of Romeoville

Warren Special Recreation Association
 17801 W. Washington St., Gurnee, IL 60031
 847.244.6619

MEMBER AGENCIES: Gurnee Park District, Grandwood Park District, Warren Township, Wildwood Park District

West Suburban Special Recreation Association (WSSRA)
 2915 Maple St., Franklin Park, IL 60131
 847.455.2100 – 847.455.2100 TTY

MEMBER AGENCIES: Berwyn Park District, Clyde Park District, Village of Elmwood Park, Park District of Forest Park, Franklin Park Park District, Village of Horwood Heights, Hawthorne Park District, Norridge Park District, North Berwyn Park District, Park District of Oak Park, River Forest Park District

Western DuPage Special Recreation Association (WDSRA)

116 N. Schmale Rd., Carol Stream, IL 60188
 630.681.0962

MEMBER AGENCIES: Bloomingdale Park District, Carol Stream Park District, Glen Ellyn Park District, Naperville Park District, Roselle Park District, Warrenville Park District, West Chicago Park District, Wheaton Park District, Winfield Park District

Source: IAPD/IPRA Membership Directory and Buyers' Guide 2002-2003

