

Creating Joint-Use Agreements That Work

How a newly created town crafted a public school/library/park that serves the community

The new town of Ladera Ranch sprouted from the hillsides of south Orange County in the late 1990s. It was billed at the first “wired” community in Southern California, laid out to the smallest detail, with plans for schools, parks and a public library. By the fall of 2003, a 25-acre campus housed an elementary and middle school, a public library and a joint-use community park.

How did such an impressive community facility come to fruition in such a short period of time? In an impressive stewardship of public funds, the local school district, the County Board of Supervisors and a major housing developer recognized a common need and a joint opportunity, and in doing so, succeeded in building a focal point for the whole community. They used a combination of joint-use agreements to merge resources.

Today, the schools house 1,800 students, and the library has a collection of 75,000 books. Students use the park for physical education with fully equipped baseball diamonds and a beach volleyball court. The park is used by community members to play sports, host picnics and engage in the full range of recreational activities supported by the California lifestyle.

Facility & Finance

Traditionally, joint use is seen as a mechanism to save capital and operational costs to the taxpayer. This deal was no different. In 1998, the California legislature approved bill SB50 to effect school facility and finance reform. Within SB50, the State Allocation Board is required to adopt

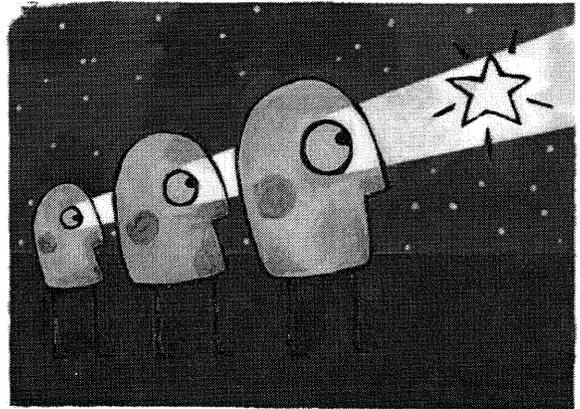
guidelines to reduce costs in school construction. Joint-use recommendations are outlined as a tool to achieve this goal.

Capistrano Unified School District has built 30 schools in the past 15 years in south Orange County and is expert at developing and implementing joint-use agreements with cities and other public agencies to improve school and community amenities. Knowing that the Orange County Public Library had development money to spend in Ladera Ranch and nowhere to build, David Doomey of Capistrano Unified School District and Dan Kelly, vice president of land developer Rancho Mission Viejo, approached John Adams of the Orange County Public Library with the idea of a joint-use school and public library facility.

Quickly recognizing the potential benefits, two joint-use agreements were drawn up to outline the partnership; one between the school district and the library for a shared library building, and a second between the school district and Merit Property Management to oversee the management of a seven-acre park. Each joint-use agreement is a legal document that sets out the terms of the partnership and describes the operational procedures for managing each facility.

Being Committed

The joint-use agreements have been successful because the leaders in each organization are committed to the project. This is critical, as with all joint-use agreements, the devil is in



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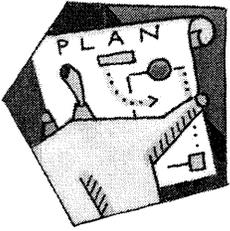
the details and turf issues arise. This is inevitable as three organizations with similar, but distinct, missions learn to work together.

For example, the school district relied on the expertise of the public library officials to combine two book circulation systems. The district set standards for Internet filtering in the children’s library. This involved compromise as the public library agreed to accept more stringent school district guidelines for Internet filtering in the children’s library, while the school district adopted the circulation system of the public library. Initially, the joint-use agreement made a provision for the library to use school district janitorial services, but a subsequent amendment removed this arrangement.

Compromise is Key

The school district works with Merit Property Management to use and maintain the seven-acre park. Again, compromise is the key. Students have first use of the fields during the school day and community members can use them after school and on weekends. School administration works with the management company to develop

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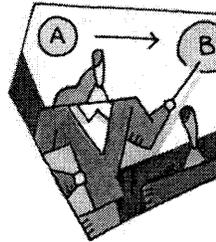
a maintenance and watering schedule that maximizes school use while keeping the fields in good repair for community events.

Each of the three partners realized independent but compatible goals. Rancho Mission Viejo, the developer, which had set aside land for recreation and schools, was able to combine smaller parcels of parkland to create a show park for the community on the site of the school. The Capistrano Unified School District had funding in the works to build schools from a combination of state and local funds and was able to upgrade the school library to create an impressive space with a book collection eight times larger than that of a typical school library. The Orange County Public Library

secured partial funding for a new library—they had enough money for a building, but not for the land to build it on. By using space on the school campus, the public library was able to open many years earlier than anticipated.

It is important to note that this project was realized during a period of severe fiscal pressure at the county and state level in California. The plans were hatched during the dotcom bubble in California but were realized during the subsequent bust when school and county finances took a big hit.

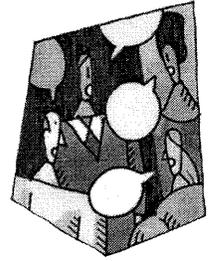
Of course, the biggest winners are students, library patrons and community members of Ladera Ranch. Students have



access to 35,000 children's and juvenile book titles—the typical school library in the district starts with 5,000 titles.

They also have extended access, as the library stays open long after the end of the school day. Library patrons have a book collection supplemented by school district books and enjoy the services of volunteer groups bolstered by school families. Finally, all members of the community can enjoy a large and well-equipped park all year long. The school, library and park complex has become the geographical and social center of the community. **DA**

Eamonn O'Donovan is principal of Ladera Ranch Middle School in Ladera Ranch, Calif.

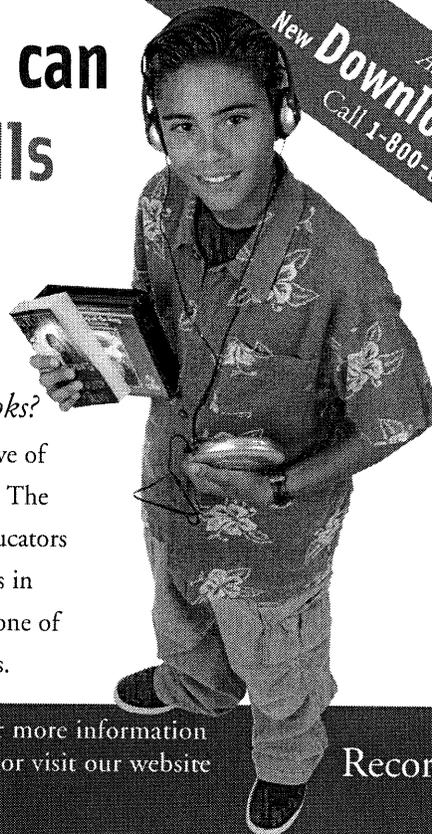


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