

Illinois Parks & Recreation Web Xtra

by Daniel R. Atilano, AIA

assessing  
the good  
the bad &  
the ugly

to get the service desk right

The service counter is the first *encounter* with people who visit your agency's recreation facility. A well-designed service desk enables staff to provide exceptional customer service and aids the facility's security efforts. But, in the throes of planning a new facility or remodeling an existing one, the service desk is often not the top priority.

After recently working on the re-design of two existing service desks and two new facilities, I began to wonder if the service desks we were designing were the best they could be for our clients. So, in the spirit of continuous improvement, I visited four clients' recreation facilities to evaluate our firm's work. My objective was to learn the good, the bad and the ugly of service desk design. Here's what I found from facilities that opened within the last five years.

### **Don't Parallel Park the Desk**

The Itasca Park District remodeled and expanded its former 32,320-square-foot fitness center and administration building in 2002. The \$1.7 million facility improvements included the construction of a 9,000-square-foot, two-story addition and remodeling 6,000 square feet. The construction included a new entry, lobby, service desk, open stairway, administrative offices and a second floor fitness center.

The former service desk was parallel to the line of traffic and only nine feet long. The space was not large enough, and the existing design made it difficult for staff to control people entering the facility without checking in first. One of the park district's goals was to design the new area to be perpendicular to the line of traffic entering the facility to improve customer service and security.

With this in mind, the new service desk area incorporates three workstations, is perpendicular to the entrance and is approximately 24-feet long. An 18-foot long adjacent rear counter provides wall and base cabinets and an open area for basketball storage racks.



Itasca's 24-foot long, curved service desk is placed opposite the entry doors. Situating the desk perpendicular to the line of traffic helps ensure that people check in to the facility rather than bypassing desk staff.



A side counter accommodates literature, forms, storage and an information board.



The Channahon Park District Heritage Crossing Field House's L-shaped service desk is 31-feet long with three workstations. The turnstiles have since been removed.

Unique design items that were incorporated include a niche for taking user photos and a side folding grille to secure the area at times when the facility is open and no one is at the service desk area. Three workstations include one stool height and one chair height facing the entry along with one chair-height workstation at the side for compliance with the Illinois Accessibility Code. Immediately adjacent to the service desk is a work area for the copier and a counter that accommodates the fax machine and other miscellaneous office equipment along with base cabinets and open wall storage units. A recess accommodates the security monitors and related equipment. A service desk at the second floor fitness area provides staff with an attractive area from which to check patrons in and out and to monitor that area.

When our work was done, the service desk counter had increased almost three fold in size. So what could be better? After speaking with Mary Mankowski and Jennifer Benitez, registration secretaries, here's what they would improve:

- Keep the size of the ADA counter to a minimum. This area is used very little and is valuable real estate that could have increased the size of the workstations.
- More acoustic consideration would have helped with the noise generated from the children entering and leaving the adjacent program spaces. At times, the noise makes it difficult for staff to hear.
- Provide shallow pencil drawers at each workstation. Without this small item, the counter becomes cluttered and looks messy.
- Incorporate wall cabinets in lieu of open shelving to hide clutter and provide a professional appearance.
- Keep equipment cabling and wires out of sight.
- Keep the adjoining work area out of public view.

### Design for the Workers as Well as the Patrons

The grand opening of Channahon Park District's \$4.2 million 35,000-square-foot Heritage Crossing Field House was held on September 21, 2003. The facility was constructed in conjunction with a 79,300-square-foot junior high school designed to serve 650 students. The L-shaped service desk is approximately 31-feet long with three workstations. A seven-foot long back counter with wall and base cabinets round out the space. The back counter area has a security monitor and desktop copier.

After three years of operation, Kristin Knutson, superintendent of special facilities, and Peggy Chapman, front desk coordinator, shared their thoughts on the good, the bad and the ugly.

#### The Good

- A cut out in the countertop for patrons to return towels.
- Stool-height workstations are customer friendly.
- Visibility of the entry and other adjacent program spaces aids in security and control.

#### The Bad

- Lack of file drawers.

#### The Ugly

- The two turnstiles, which were installed as required by the school district for security reasons, were removed after about two years of use. They were not welcoming. They were difficult for people of all ages and sizes to maneuver through. A side gate was provided adjacent to the turnstiles to accommodate strollers, wheelchairs and large groups of people leaving the facility.



Lockport's service desk enables staff to monitor the main entry, fitness area, indoor tennis courts and the entrance to the kids' club.



Joliet's main service desk welcomes patrons in a light-filled lobby.

The gate was left open most of the time, which defeated the purpose of the turnstiles. Overall, the public and staff didn't like the turnstiles.

The perceived security threat by the school district was that their gym was not totally within their control, since it was part of another facility. The turnstiles were an attempt to ensure staff knew who was entering the facility and for what purpose. It was originally thought that the public would enter and leave the school's gymnasium from the park district's main entry for school activities. Other concerns included people on the elevated jogging track that passes through the school's gym on three sides, as well as the overall openness of the park district facility versus a typical school facility that is more 'secure.' However, after the facility opened, staff discovered that the public enters and leaves the school gym from a school entrance. Given this circulation pattern, the turnstiles were no longer required.

### Storage, Workspace and Outlets

Lockport Township Park District's newly renovated and expanded 71,790-square-foot Challenge Fitness center re-opened in June 2006. The original 57,280-square-foot facility opened in 1975 and was predominately an indoor tennis facility. The \$4.2 million worth of construction improvements included a 14,510-square-foot addition and 4,880-square-foot remodeling.

Three workstations were incorporated into the u-shaped service desk area along with an accessible area. The counter area length totals approximately 32 feet. Twelve feet of clear travel area was provided between the desk and the adjacent wall. Here are some suggested improvements from Ben Ragle, facility manager, and Sue Krause, office coordinator.

- Design each workstation area to be a minimum of 3'-6" to 4' wide.
- Incorporate moveable shelves to provide the flexibility required to properly store items and equipment that may not have been anticipated during the design phase.
- Provide one 12-inch high file drawer with two, six-inch high drawers above to provide storage for large and small supplies at each workstation.
- Keep the counter area a minimum of twelve inches wide at all areas to allow patrons to use it as a writing surface.
- Provide plastic grommets at horizontal surfaces of each workstation for cables and electrical plugs for equipment.
- Provide quad electrical outlets at each workstation.

### Putting It All Together

The Joliet Park District celebrated the January 6, 2007 grand opening for its new \$10.9 million, 62,970-square-foot Provena St. Joseph Inwood Athletic Club. A U-shaped counter with four workstations greets the public in a high-low counter arrangement. The service desk conveys a 'club' feel by incorporating wood laminate panels in a simple, yet sophisticated look. Immediately behind the service desk is a workroom, where staff can count cash and perform other work-related activities out of the public view.

A second service counter is located on the second floor at the fitness floor entrance immediately opposite of an open staircase and elevator. This area is a space for checking fitness patrons in and for monitoring the area. The three workstations keep this area from backing up during prime times.

## A Fist Full of Lessons Learned

Here are my top ten items to consider when designing a service desk.

**1. Get the height right.** Determine if the staff will be sitting in chairs or standing and using stools when serving patrons. If using a chair, the lower counter height should be 30 inches. Whereas, if stools are used, the lower counter height should be 36 inches. The service counter height can vary between 40 to 44 inches. The lower dimension works better for people in wheelchairs if they are scanning a membership card.

**2. Make it the right size.** Provide twelve lineal feet of countertop for each workstation. Therefore, if you plan on two workstations, the counter area should be approximately 24 feet long.

**3. Keep the design flexible.** Shelves that are moveable will enable staff to adjust them to meet their changing needs.

**4. Hide the clutter.** A high-low counter arrangement provides the opportunity to keep the clutter to a minimum. A countertop with clutter is unattractive and detracts from your facility's look. Open shelving is not conducive to a clean and organized appearance.

**5. Conceal the spaghetti.** Provide removable panels at the staff side to conceal unsightly electrical cords and cabling.

**6. More power.** Incorporate a minimum of four electrical outlets for each workstation to minimize or eliminate power cords.

**7. Know the merchandise.** Understand the items that the agency may be selling and or displaying to provide appropriate and integrated display systems.

**8. Drawer storage = 1 + 2.** Provide one file drawer plus two small drawers per workstation to keep the area looking organized.

**9. Know about distribution and collection.** Be sure to find out if staff will be distributing and collecting basketballs, towels or other fitness-related equipment to ensure a proper space is designed to accommodate those items.

**10. Involve appropriate staff.** I know that this sounds obvious, but having the people who will be responsible for this area involved during the design process is probably the best way to get it right. The failure to involve staff might all too easily result in the question, "Why did they do it this way?"



Vibrant colors and task lighting highlight the busy fitness floor service desk.



A juice bar with a food prep area was incorporated to the fitness floor service desk to keep these two different activities' appearance cohesive.

## Final Thoughts

Here are some questions to consider during the design phase.

- How will patrons be checked-in and out?
- Will membership cards be issued? If yes, where will the card machine(s) be located and what are the dimensions?
- Will security equipment be located at the service desk? If yes, what are the sizes of the components and where are their desired locations?
- If photo IDs will be taken, where will that process occur and what size will the equipment be?
- Will staff be seated on chairs or stools when assisting patrons?
- Are there good sight lines from the service desk to the entry and to other program spaces?
- If a security system is planned, what size will it be and where will it be located?

Good luck on getting your service desk right.

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