

COMPARING AMENITIES AND COSTS

By William Nicoson

I once had a grumpy schoolmate who offered a single response to every positive or negative judgment anyone expressed. "Compared to what?" he growled derisively.

If I ventured the view today that Reston is blessed by a magnificent array of amenities (such as pools, tennis courts, pathways and parks), I can imagine his reply: "Compared to what? Columbia?" The derision in his tone might have some quantitative merit.

The planned community of Columbia, Maryland, is closing down development at about 85,000 residents, compared to Reston's 65,000 estimated at completion of Town Center. The Columbia Association maintains 3,100 acres of open space and 80 miles of pathways, compared to Reston Association's 1,100 acres and 55 miles. CA operates 23 outdoor and 2 indoor swimming pools, compared to RA's 15 outdoor and Reston Community Center's 1 indoor. CA maintains 23 outdoor tennis courts and 6 indoor courts, compared to RA's 49 outdoor and none indoor. CA runs 3 health and fitness clubs; RA closed its fitness club rather than invest new capital to be competitive. CA operates two 18-hole golf courses; Reston has 1 public and 1 private course, neither operated by RA. CA maintains an elaborate horse center; when the RA stables collapsed early in Reston's history, they were never replaced.

Ice skating is possible throughout the year at CA's rink; in Reston, skating is seasonal in Town Center's flooded plaza. CA last year opened a state-of-the-art "skatepark" for rollerblading and skateboarding; RA's lengthy discussions about providing such facilities have thus far yielded nothing.

Though, by numbers analysis, Reston surpasses Columbia only in outdoor tennis, my view remains that it offers a magnificent array of amenities. Reston's founder, Robert Simon, was right to engage the private sector for Reston golfers, and for the same reason RA's decision to relinquish fitness services to private competitors was correct. Since CA's horse center serves less than 1% of Columbia's residents and has lost more than \$500,000 over the last four years, RA's decision not to rebuild the stables looks providential.

The astonishing difference between CA and RA operations is cost to residents. CA's 2001 budget projects expenditures of \$44 million; RA's 2001 expenditures are projected at \$8.5 million. CA's assessment is collected from all business as well as residential property owners based on property valuation by the county: 73 cents per \$100 valuation. This revenue is supplemented by annual user fees on the order of \$600 per family. I calculate that, without user fees, converting RA's \$370 flat annual assessment on residential owners to an *ad valorem* rate on all Reston property would require only 13 cents per \$100. Currently a \$100,000 house is assessed by CA at \$730 while a \$300,000 house is assessed by RA at \$370.

A major reason for the discrepancy in budgets between CA and RA is the fact that debt service constitutes 32% of CA expenditures. That's some \$14 million, far more than RA's entire budget. CA's term debt of close to \$86 million is the legacy of development by CA of the amenities it owns. Simon spared all Restonians such a legacy by financing amenities just like roads and other infrastructure, then donating the amenities to RA free of debt. That's not the least of the blessings conferred by Robert Simon on his fellow Restonians.

William Nicoson is a former publisher of Connection Newspapers and a former RA director.