

Change due in parks operation

By Carolyn Brown
Guest Columnist

Sarasota County recently sent letters to the cities providing notice of termination of existing agreements for parks and recreation services.

As we are faced with continued budget pressure, the county sent these letters to notify the cities of a potential change or amendment or the need for a new agreement in the next budget year beginning Oct. 1, 2018. In no case is the county reducing its services at these parks during the current budget year.

Many years ago, local government leaders determined that it would be in the community's best interest for Sarasota County to operate and maintain the majority of the parks within the cities of North Port, Sarasota and Venice as well as those within the unincorporated areas.

Sarasota County Parks and Recreation leaders and staff have done an amazing job of creating positive recreational opportunities, as well as managing and maintaining more than 160 parks and recreational facilities countywide.

Among other things, we have worked with multiple youth athletic groups, including youth baseball, softball and football organizations. We have implemented summer camp programs; offered exercise, yoga and dance classes; provided tennis

and pickleball; protected miles of beach shoreline; and worked with the young and the young at heart.

We have always had a deep commitment to improving the quality of life of all citizens of Sarasota County through parks and recreation services, and we have done it with enthusiasm and a profound sense of caring and pride. We have continuously looked for ways to improve; this has always been our goal.

Over time, agreements between Sarasota County and the cities have been renewed, amended or altered due to changing circumstances. For example, parks and facilities have been added or deleted from the agreements. Many parks or amenities were improved.

We are currently faced with fiscal challenges, and we will continue to work with the cities on how to better approach the next generation of interlocal agreements, while keeping in mind the goals and objectives of our recently adopted parks master plan, which resulted from extensive community outreach and planning.

Moving forward, we will need to operate under a new paradigm with substantial shifts in our thinking related to the delivery of services; continuing to operate under the current model may not be the best approach.

As we approach the end of the current agreements, the

key component to the county's future investment in parks and recreation services with any of the cities is that it must clearly contribute to keeping our community healthy and provide benefits on a regional basis.

Therefore, new agreements must capture the essence of contemporary thinking and have an overarching concept of good governance, with the ultimate goal of delivering effective regional services.

While detailed discussions with staff and among elected officials have not yet taken place, it is important to note that, despite the myth that the county is walking away from "our kids," the fact is we are taking proactive measures to continue to make Sarasota County the best place for all to live, work and play.

There is much work to be done in the coming months as discussions about the county's budget continue and as we closely examine the interlocal agreements and other parks services.

It is time to roll up our sleeves and approach this unique opportunity with discipline and an open mind. As one of the many dedicated staff members, who has served this community for 29 years, I am confident we will find the absolute best outcome.

Carolyn Brown is the director of Sarasota County Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources.