



A Worthy Goal

Proposal shoots for better community centers, savings



The Hickory Hill Community Center, where friends enjoy an after-chool game, is one of 24 operated by the city. Four others are run by **Memphis Athletic Ministries** through a public-private partnership that officials say saves the city about \$600,000 a year.

BY AMOS MAKI

A City Council member wants the city to consider outsourcing all community center operations to nonprofit or neighborhood-based organizations. Jim Strickland is sponsoring a resolution asking the Wharton administration to develop requests for proposals to allow private groups to compete to run city community centers. "First, I want to provide the people who use these centers with better service, and second, I want to save the taxpayers money," Strickland said.

The councilman is hosting a community hearing on his proposal at 5:30 p.m. Aug. 31 at Gaisman Community Center.

The city has 24 community centers, excluding four that a faith-based nonprofit organization began running last year. Those four centers -- Greenlaw, Simon/Boyd-Magnolia, Bethel Labelle and Hamilton -- were nearly closed by former mayor Willie Herenton in 2008. The public-private partnership with **Memphis Athletic Ministries**, a faith-based organization that uses sports to reach kids, kept the doors open. The ministries' deal with the city has an initial term of two years and two, four-year options, which means the agreement could last a total of 10 years. **MAM** staffs the community centers, provides all the recreational activities and pays the utility bills.

"The lease of the four centers to **MAM** saved the city approximately \$600,000 annually," said parks director Cindy Buchanan. The centers are still used as voting sites, and for meetings of census workers and other government agencies, as well as for neighborhood association meetings and activities such as majorette practice.

Strickland cited other instances of private organizations improving city attractions -- including the Memphis Zoo and Memphis Botanic Garden. "They are all running those facilities much better than the city could and one of the big reasons is nonprofits can raise money from the private sector to enhance the services," said Strickland.

But Maggie Zuendel, a self-described concerned citizen, said she worries that the number of programs offered at privately run centers could plummet and that employees could be fired. "I just don't think all the questions have been answered yet," said Zuendel.

Buchanan said Strickland's measure should go to Mayor A C Wharton's Strategic Assessment Committee, which is exploring ways to streamline services.