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Designing and Operating a Successful Equestrian Facility:

The Essentials of Programming

Horses appeal to many people for many different reasons. For some, it is their sheer magnitude, presence and beauty. For others, it is the pursuit of the interconnectedness (becoming one with the horse) that is possible through riding. For still others, horses represent natural open space with minimal human manipulation. Horses, open meadows, woody bridle paths—all these images remind us of our connection to the earth and to the web of life.

Whether the private individual desiring to bring their horses home or a resort or community looking to create an equestrian amenity, the programming phase is an essential first step to designing and operating a successful equestrian facility. Many can design a barn (this is actually the easy part), the complex and key component to success is understanding precisely what the barn and any associated facilities are to achieve. This is programming. Effectively and accurately developing a program that meets a client's individual goals, produces valuable results including i) the remainder of the design process to proceed more directly and with fewer iterations ii) construction to proceed with fewer changes and iii) the establishment of a well-defined framework for

operations from the design phase. This adds value by reducing both the time and cost of the overall project.

Programming

In order to achieve success with any equestrian project, it is necessary to think



from the end. Decide on what your ultimate goals are before you begin to design your facility. For example, if you need your facility to cover its expenses or turn a profit, what kind of equestrian program will you need? How aggressive will your marketing campaign be?

What would be the most lucrative equestrian discipline to cater to? How many stalls should be allocated to lesson horses, to boarders? Can your area demographics support this program? How many barn hands and instructors will you need to employ? What will your insurance costs be?

It is also important to consider what limitations you may be faced with. Total acreage available for the facility, budgetary constraints and municipal regulations are just a few of the items (albeit significant ones) that can affect programming and design criteria.

It is crucial that you begin your programming phase with a fully detailed operational analysis. What are your costs for operating the facility, including labor, electricity, water, manure removal, hay, feed, bedding, etc? Have you allocated appropriate funds for repairs and maintenance? Payments on the tractor, truck and horse trailer? What about replacement costs down the road?

Answering all of these questions, and more, before you begin the design process will help establish the design criteria for the project. Why build a 40-stall barn if there is even the hint of a chance that you may not keep it filled? Build a 20-stall barn for now and design for expansion later. Better to have a full successful operation with a healthy waiting list than empty stalls. Understand your competitors so you can price your product competitively, and also consider ways to set yourself apart. Consider offering a-la-carte services for red carpet treatment or the scheduling of mounted and non-mounted clinics. In providing these types of services, you will draw people to your program.

A business plan is also always a great idea even if you aren't planning to go to a bank for financing. This process can help put a dream on paper and get you thinking from a business perspective. Often horse-related decisions are emotionally based and not sound from a business point of view. Many are fortunate enough that they need not be concerned with the potential financial drain a facility can produce. Even so, why not consider at least breaking even? If you plan wisely, you can have your cake and eat it, too.

When programming for a resort or equestrian community, there are many other considerations to account for. Will you create equestrian estate lots and/or a community equestrian center? Will the facility be open

to the area-at-large or only to residents of the community? Will you need to create trail easements? What will the rules be for the community members? How much will you need to assess the Home Owners Association to help cover operational costs? Is your community seasonal? Second homes? If so, how will you plan for the seasonal or weekend influx of members and guests? What are some of the key components that will need to be included in your Declaration of Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions? Programming for resorts and communities, again, is essential and paramount to success.

For example, a recent tour of an equestrian facility at a very upscale resort demonstrated that it was planned poorly and overbuilt. There were 3-4 very small paddocks for turn-out, a very small outdoor riding arena, a very beautiful (but essentially empty 40 stall barn (four horses stalled after being open for three years). The planning was such that the center was land-locked with no possibility of expanding pasture and turn-out area. Horses that are not turned out regularly become unhappy, neurotic and sometimes dangerous. This is a prime example of a design plan that had either ineffective or no programming.

Design Phases

Once you have identified your programming parameters, including defining your market, its needs and your financial requirements, you are ready to begin the design phase. From the time spent on programming, the “pie” of possibilities should now be reduced to only a slice or two. Additionally, your comfort level with the direction you are proceeding should be very high because the designs now created are directly linked to the goals you established previously. Now, rather than exploring broad options, you can spend your design budget carefully refining the narrowed range of options that will truly meet your objectives. Accurate base mapping data is an important prerequisite to the design process. This typically will include scaleable aerial photography with topographic contours (generally at 1- or 2-foot intervals) for the site. It is wise to have your equestrian land planner produce at least two different designs to allow you to “see” different representations of your concept. Often, all of the site objectives cannot be met in one plan and this will allow you to compare and contrast how the various elements are presented. Through discussions

with your equestrian planner, you will select elements from each that are then incorporated into a final drawing. This becomes the Master Plan upon which all construction phasing is based. It is important to note that plans should be designed with expansion potential if possible; even if you don’t envision it happening now. Flexibility in design now presents options for the future. Remember also that you cannot have too much space for pasture. A good starting point is to allocate 1 acre per horse.

Construction Drawings and Construction

In thoroughly programming your equestrian facility, you will have worked through several preliminary construction budgets and may have identified possible contractors. You will already have a realistic set of expectations related to the cost and timetable for building your facility. From the programming phase, it will likely be decided how best to proceed into the construction phase. If the project has a lot of detail and needs to tie in architecturally with other structures, like a clubhouse, using an equine architect is your best choice. Please note the significance of “equine” as part of the architect’s title. Equine structures are very specific in nature and require the expertise of an equine professional. There are many architects in the world; very few are qualified to design for equine use. Using an equine architect for the structures will appropriately provide for the health and safety of the horses and riders. The drawings provided by the architect would then be used to solicit bids from contractors and construction can then proceed.

On projects requiring somewhat less sophisticated design, another option would be to work with a barn design-build firm. There are many excellent firms of this type. One advantage of using a design-build firm is that the design and build processes work together seamlessly. Another advantage is that the “design” portion of the work is generally included with the “build” portion so that the cost of the architect can be avoided.

Operations

The ultimate reward for spending the time and money to thoroughly and effectively program your equestrian facility is that it runs well. It meets financial expectations, operates efficiently and safely, offers the appropriate level of services and you and the barn clientele are happy. While the construction problems arising from poor programming may seem

disruptive and costly at the time, they are only acute one-time events. From an operations standpoint, the chronic problems associated with no or ineffective programming can be more costly overall and ultimately lead to the failure of the facility. With proper programming, operating expenses are carefully considered long before the first horse arrives or even the first post is set. Riding program expectations and their ramifications are understood. Labor needs for the barn and grounds are considered and the list of services offered is defined. The entire operations process has been thoughtfully evaluated and, while not a guarantee for success, provides a much greater potential for a facility to thrive.

From the simple example of setting a fence line where it “should” go the first time to the consideration of the complex relationship between facility size, boarding/lesson program offered, residential lot size/cost and investor return, the value of programming in the design, construction and operation of an equestrian facility is in developing a true goal-based program. This is accomplished through the exploration of creative and innovative concepts that are critically evaluated to ensure they meet the stated goals. Initial (and expected) iterations and modifications occur during an early cost-appropriate period (in discussions and on paper, not when in the ground). The final product is a facility that best meets the clearly and fully defined set of objectives. ♦

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