CITY OF RICHLAND CENTER - AGENDA ITEM DATA SHEET

Agenda Item: Consider modernizing community engagement by transitioning to Digital-First Activity Guides and sponsorship options.

Committee Review: Park Board

Meeting Date: March 23rd, 2026

Requested by: Jodi Mieden- Recreation Director

Background: Currently, we spend nearly $3,000 a year on paper that often ends up in the recycling bin before the season is even over. By modernizing our guide, we aren't just 'saving money'—we are choosing to upgrade our software to streamline staff processes that are often cobbled just to get by, in turn enhancing the customer's experience. To improve operational efficiency and fiscal responsibility, the Parks & Recreation Department proposes a phased transition from a mass-mailed printed Activity Guide to a **Digital-First Interactive Guide**. This shift follows the successful models of three Wisconsin cities with populations like Richland Center. Nearly all have moved to a **"Digital First"** model. They typically provide an interactive PDF or flipbook online while keeping a very limited number of printed copies at City Hall or the public library for those without internet access.

Three City Comparison Study

City	Population	Primary Guide Format	Revenue / Registration Impact
Viroqua	~4,500	Digital Flipbook	**Neutral/Positive.** They use a consolidated guide with school/library programs, driving higher traffic to their website.
Dodgeville	~5,000	Digital Flyer/RecDesk	**Positive.** They moved to a "Current Activity Flyer" model on RecDesk which allows for real-time updates and immediate registration.
Prairie du Chien	~5,500	Digital PDF / Limited Print	**Neutral.** They provide a full PDF guide via RecDesk, keeping the "look" of a magazine without the printing bill.

Pros and Cons of Each Format:

Virtual (Digital) Guide

- **Pros:** * **Cost Savings:** Eliminates 100% of printing and bulk-mail postage costs.

    o **Flexibility:** You can fix a typo or update/add a class instantly without "white-out" or flyers.

    o **Direct Action:** You can embed hyperlinks directly into the registration page, shortening the "path to purchase." Real time calendar access for customers to view schedules and reserve.

- **Cons:** * **Accessibility:** Seniors or low-income households may struggle without a physical copy.

    o **"Out of Sight":** Unlike a book on a counter, a digital file can be forgotten in an inbox.

Print Version

- **Pros:** * **Tangibility:** People like to circle things and keep them on the fridge.

    o **Brand Presence:** It acts as a seasonal "nudge" to the entire community when it arrives in the mail.

- **Cons:** * **Waste:** High percentage of copies go straight to recycling.

    o **Static:** Information is outdated the moment a coach cancels or a class fills up.

Did they lose revenue?

The data from similar municipalities suggests no loss in revenue, provided the transition is handled well. In fact, most departments report:

1. **Increased "Impulse" Sign-ups:** Because the digital guide links directly to the payment page.

2. **Resource Reallocation:** Money saved on printing (often $2,000–$3,000 per issue for small towns) is reinvested into better equipment benefitting other city departments in the process.

3. **Data Tracking:** Digital guides allow you to see exactly which pages people are looking at, helping you identify unpopular programs and boost high-revenue ones.

Fiscal Impact & Reinvestment Power

By moving to a digital model, the city will save an estimated $3,000 annually. We plan to reinvest every dollar saved into tangible community accessibility and long-term value for the city every single year without asking for additional tax dollars. It Eliminates significant annual expenditure on professional printing, paper stock, and bulk-mail postage and puts it back into customer service and smoother workplace standard operating procedures.

Reinvestment: What $3,000 Could Potentially Purchase

Software: Cloud hosted Upgrades for WAC/REC software to increase efficiency & ease for staff and our customers.

The 12-Month Transition Timeline

We recommend a "Soft Landing" approach to ensure all residents, particularly seniors, remain connected.

- **Phase 1 (Spring/Summer 2026): The Hybrid Approach.** Print guides as usual but feature a prominent QR code and digital "call to action." **Surveying:** We added the registration question we discussed earlier to gauge who is ready to switch.

"To help us go green, we are considering moving to a fully digital, interactive Activity Guide. On a scale of 1-5, how much would this change impact your ability to register for programs?" *(1 = No impact at all, 5 = Significant difficulty)*

- **Phase 2 (Fall/Winter): The Postcard Nudge.** End mass-mailing of booklets. Mail a high-impact postcard with a QR code and directions to print copies or view online or a simple 2-page "At-a-Glance" flyer that people can still stick on their fridge.

- **Phase 3 (Spring/Summer 2027): Digital-First.** Fully interactive guide online. 1-page "Fridge Flyers" available for pickup; tablet available in the lobby for in-person support.

Community Accessibility & FAQ

To ensure no residents are left behind, the department will commit to the following:

- **Lobby Copies:** We will print the program pages for anyone that asks and will have a few fully printed office guides and will assist with registration as needed on-site.

- **Searchable Format:** The digital guide will be mobile-optimized and searchable, making it easier for users to find programs than flipping through a 24-page book.

- **Direct Links:** One-click registration from the digital guide will reduce user frustration and increase sign-up rates.

Sponsorships ads and how it affects them

The shift to virtual guides has fundamentally changed the "Sponsor Ad" landscape for municipal parks. While it removes some of the traditional "coffee table" prestige of a print ad, it offers several high-tech benefits that many modern businesses actually prefer.

1. From Static Images to Interactive Leads

In a print guide, a sponsor's ad is just a picture. In a digital guide, that ad becomes an **active marketing tool**:

- **Direct Click-Throughs:** A local orthodontist or pizza parlor can have their ad link directly to a "Book Now" page or a "Download Coupon" button.

- **Measurable ROI:** Unlike print, where a sponsor has no idea how many people actually looked at their ad, digital guides allow the city to provide [real-time analytics](#) like click-through rates and total views.

- **Embedded Video:** Some virtual guides (like those using platforms such as [Issuu](#)) allow sponsors to embed short video commercials or "meet the staff" clips directly into the page.

2. Dynamic Pricing and Flexibility

Virtual guides allow parks departments to offer more flexible "packages" than traditional print:

- **Late Additions:** In the past, if a business missed the print deadline, they were out for the entire season. Now, a city can add a digital ad at any time.

- **Segmented Targeting:** Departments can sell "section-specific" sponsorships (e.g., a local sporting goods store sponsoring only the "Youth Sports" section of the digital PDF).

- **A/B Testing:** Sponsors can [experiment with different headlines or images](#) mid-season to see which one gets more clicks, something impossible with physical guides.

3. The "Trade-Offs" for Sponsors

While the tech is better, some sponsors still feel the loss of the physical guide:

- **Loss of Longevity:** A printed guide often sits on a kitchen counter for three months. A digital guide is often closed as soon as the registration is finished, reducing the "passive" brand awareness for the sponsor.

- **The "Premium" Feel:** Some high-end sponsors (like real estate agents or banks) still view print as more "credible" and trustworthy than a digital banner ad, which can sometimes be ignored or blocked.

How Cities are Compensating

To keep sponsors happy during the digital transition, cities are now including "Digital Plus" bundles:

- **Website Banners:** Ads are placed on the high-traffic registration landing page, not just inside the guide.

- **Email Blasts:** Including the sponsor's logo in the "Registration is Open!" email sent to thousands of households.

- **Social Media Shoutouts:** Dedicated "Sponsor Spotlight" posts on the city's Facebook or Instagram pages.

Ad Type	Print Guide	Virtual Guide
Shelf Life	Months (on the fridge).	Minutes (per session).
Tracking	Guesswork.	Precise (clicks/views).
Interactivity	None.	High (links/video).
Cost to City	High (ink/paper).	Near Zero.

Print Marketing vs Digital Marketing

While both print and digital marketing & advertising are used by marketers and businesses they each have unique benefits. Here we're sharing some of those benefits for each.

Benefits of Print Marketing

Listed below are ten benefits of print marketing that we think are important to share.

- **Tangible & Physical Presence –** Print materials such as brochures, flyers, and business cards provide a tangible and physical representation of your brand or message. People can touch, hold, and keep these items, creating a lasting impression.

- **Credibility and Trust –** Print materials are often perceived as more credible and trustworthy compared to digital ads, which can sometimes be associated with spam or fraudulent content. Well-designed print materials can enhance your brand's credibility.

- **Less Competition** – As many businesses focus on digital marketing, there may be less competition in the print space, allowing your print materials to stand out more effectively.

- **Longevity** – Print materials often have a longer lifespan than digital content. For example, a well-designed brochure or magazine ad can be kept for weeks, months, or even years, serving as a constant reminder of your brand.

- **Engagement** – Print materials encourage a different kind of engagement compared to digital ads. Readers tend to spend more time with printed content, giving your message more attention.

- **No Ad Blockers** – Unlike digital advertising, print marketing doesn't suffer from ad blockers that can prevent your digital ads from reaching your target audience.

- **Local Appeal** – For businesses with a local focus, print marketing, such as flyers, posters, and local newspaper ads, can be an effective way to connect with the community.

- **Complementary to Digital** – Print marketing can be used in conjunction with digital marketing strategies to create a more comprehensive and integrated marketing campaign.

- **Personalization** – Print materials can be personalized, allowing you to address the recipient by name or include customized content tailored to their interests or needs.

- **Tactile and Sensory Experience** – The physical nature of print materials can engage multiple senses, creating a memorable experience for the audience through textures, finishes, and even scents in some cases.

The "Print" Advantage: Why some sponsors still want it

Despite the digital push, some businesses still prefer the rare printed version. Research shows that:

- **Higher Recall:** Consumers [recall brands from print ads at a 70% higher rate](#) than digital ads.

- **Longevity:** A print ad stays in a home for an average of **17 days**, whereas a digital ad is often closed within seconds.

- **Less Competition:** As most businesses move to digital, those who remain in the limited print editions (or the "Snapshot Mailers") [stand out more effectively](#).

Digital Advertising Benefits

Then you have digital advertising & marketing which also has its own unique benefits that we are sharing ten of those below.

- **Global Reach** – Digital marketing allows you to reach a vast and global audience, breaking down geographical barriers. You can target audiences across different regions and countries, expanding your customer base.

- **Real-Time Analytics** – Digital marketing provides immediate access to real-time analytics and performance data. You can track key metrics like website traffic, conversions, click-through rates, and return on investment (ROI) and adjust your campaigns accordingly for optimal results.

- **Quick Campaign Deployment** – Digital marketing campaigns can be launched quickly. You can create and run ads within hours or days, allowing for rapid responses to market trends and changing customer behaviors.

- **Measurable Results** – Unlike traditional advertising, which can be challenging to measure accurately, digital marketing provides precise data on campaign performance. This data helps you understand what's working and what needs improvement.

- **Interactive Content** – Digital marketing allows for interactive content formats, such as videos, quizzes, polls, and surveys, which engage and captivate audiences more effectively than static content.

- **Personalization** – You can tailor your digital marketing messages to individual users based on their past interactions, preferences, and behaviors, enhancing the customer experience and increasing the chances of conversion.

- **A/B Testing** – Digital marketing platforms enable A/B testing, allowing you to experiment with different ad variations, headlines, images, and calls to action to determine which elements resonate best with your audience.

- **Mobile Accessibility** – With the proliferation of smartphones and mobile devices, digital marketing allows you to reach users on the devices they use most often. Mobile-friendly websites and mobile advertising options are essential for modern marketing strategies.

- **Content Marketing** – Digital marketing facilitates content marketing efforts, including blogging, social media posts, and email campaigns, which can help build brand authority, educate customers, and nurture leads over time.

- **Adaptive Marketing** – You can adapt your digital marketing campaigns in real time based on changing trends, customer feedback, and market dynamics, ensuring that your messaging remains relevant.

How Sponsor Ads are Changing

- **Direct Click-Throughs:** In a virtual guide, ads are no longer static. They are [hyperlinked directly to the sponsor's website](), allowing a parent to click an ad for a local orthodontist or pizza parlor and immediately book an appointment or see a menu.

- **Analytics and ROI:** Municipalities can now provide sponsors with **exact data**, such as how many people viewed their ad and how many clicked it. This is a major selling point for local businesses that want to ensure their [marketing budget is being spent effectively]().

- **Multimedia Integration:** Some digital platforms allow for [embedded :30 commercials or video demonstrations]() within the guide itself, turning a traditional "page ad" into a mini-commercial.

The shift to virtual guides has not eliminated sponsor ads; rather, it has transformed them into a **data-driven marketing tool**. While print ads are often seen as more "trustworthy" and have a longer physical presence in the home, digital ads offer interactivity and precision that traditional guides simply cannot match.

Sample Sponsor Pricing & Packages

Most departments now bundle digital guide ads with other "high-visibility" digital assets. Based on current 2026 sponsor guides, here is what typical pricing looks like:

Ad Type	Estimated Cost	Audience/Reach
Full Page Virtual Guide Ad	$500 – $1,200	200,000+ views per guide
Email Blast Sponsor	$250 – $500	~40,000 subscribers (45% open rate)
Website Banner Ad	$750 – $1,500	50,000+ monthly visits
Social Media Shoutout	$150 – $300	15,000+ followers
Youth League Jersey Logo	$150 – $600	700+ families per season

What this means for the City

By going virtual, cities can offer **"Tiered Sponsorships."** A local business might pay for a "Presenting Sponsorship" ($1,800+) which includes a logo on the website, a full-page ad in the digital guide, and logo inclusion in all program-specific emails.

Department Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board approve transitioning to Digital-First Activity Guides in a 3-phase process, to allow for software upgrades.

Financial Impact: $3,000

Funding Source: Community Center Promo Material 10-55200-385