

SFN Team · Feb 26, 2024

# Non-Profit US Community Squash Centers: A Model of Social Engagement



*Barrett Takesian Executive Director of the Portland Community Squash*

Time and again, we hear inspiring stories from the USA about non-profit community squash centers that have a remarkable impact on underserved communities. Leading this movement is the Squash and Education Alliance (SEA), a network of non-profit organizations that now includes 19 centers in the United States and five associate members abroad. These facilities use squash not just as a sport, but as a powerful tool to provide over 2,500 young people with educational opportunities and support.

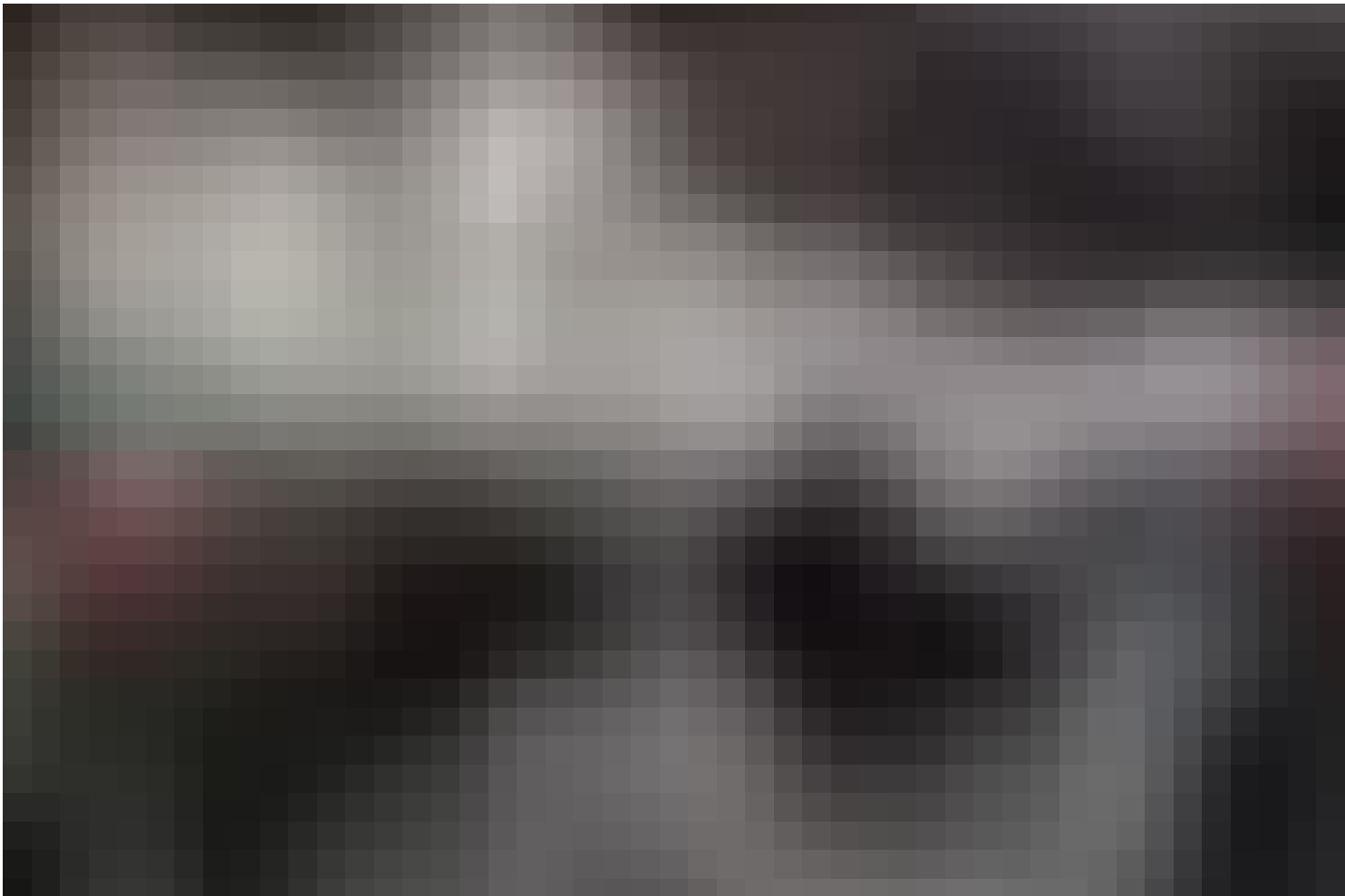
In recent years, many SEA programs in the USA have opened new facilities, including notable projects like Steel City Squash in Pittsburgh, SquashWise in Baltimore, CitySquash in the Bronx, SquashBusters Lawrence in Boston, and Portland Community Squash in Maine. These centers serve as shining examples of how sport and education can work together to effect positive changes in society.

A standout example of the ambitions and success of this movement is the Arlen Specter US Squash Center, a project realized with an investment of 27 million US dollars. This historic endeavor was made possible by the vision and generosity of supporters from across the country, led by a significant donation from Tracey and Shanin Specter. The facility is dedicated to Shanin's late father Arlen, the longest-serving US Senator from Pennsylvania, known for his passion for squash.

The Specter Center and similar community centers aim to serve as models for community engagement, facilitating access to squash for urban youths and public school programs. In partnership with SquashSmarts, a local squash and education program, the learning and innovation center acts as a catalyst to expand awareness and access to squash, thus having a profound impact on thousands of school-aged children in the Philadelphia community.

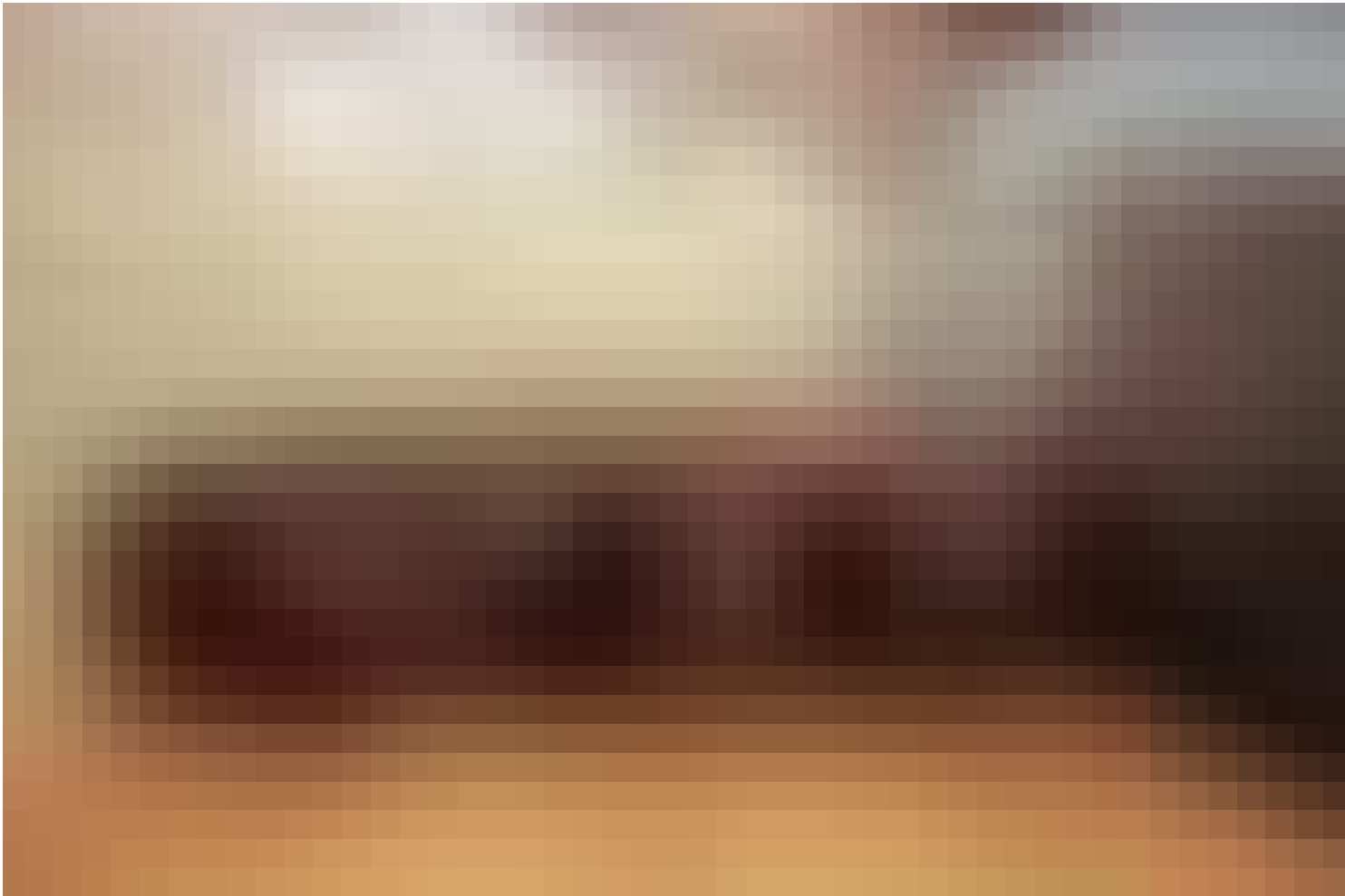
#### **Portland Community Squash: A Prime Example of Sustainable Community Centers**

The Portland Community Squash Center (PCS) is a shining example of how a local squash center can play a central role in the community beyond the sport itself. Under the leadership of Executive Director Barrett Takesian, PCS has become an integral part of the Portland community since its founding in 2013 by Barrett Takesian, Sandy Spaulding, and Greg Born. With an initial investment of 1.5 million dollars – half debt, half philanthropy - PCS transformed an old synagogue into a vibrant community center that offers much more than just squash courts.



*Kickoff Party 2012 in a potential space*

Since opening in January 2017, the facility initially offered four squash courts, a small gym, and locker rooms. However, PCS is not standing still. "We are currently in a phase of expanding the facility with an investment volume of 6 million dollars," Takesian explains. The goal of this expansion is to significantly increase capacity by acquiring neighboring properties and expanding the existing facilities. This includes two additional singles courts, a hardball doubles court, a new, larger gym, and the creation of a café and social spaces that were previously missing.



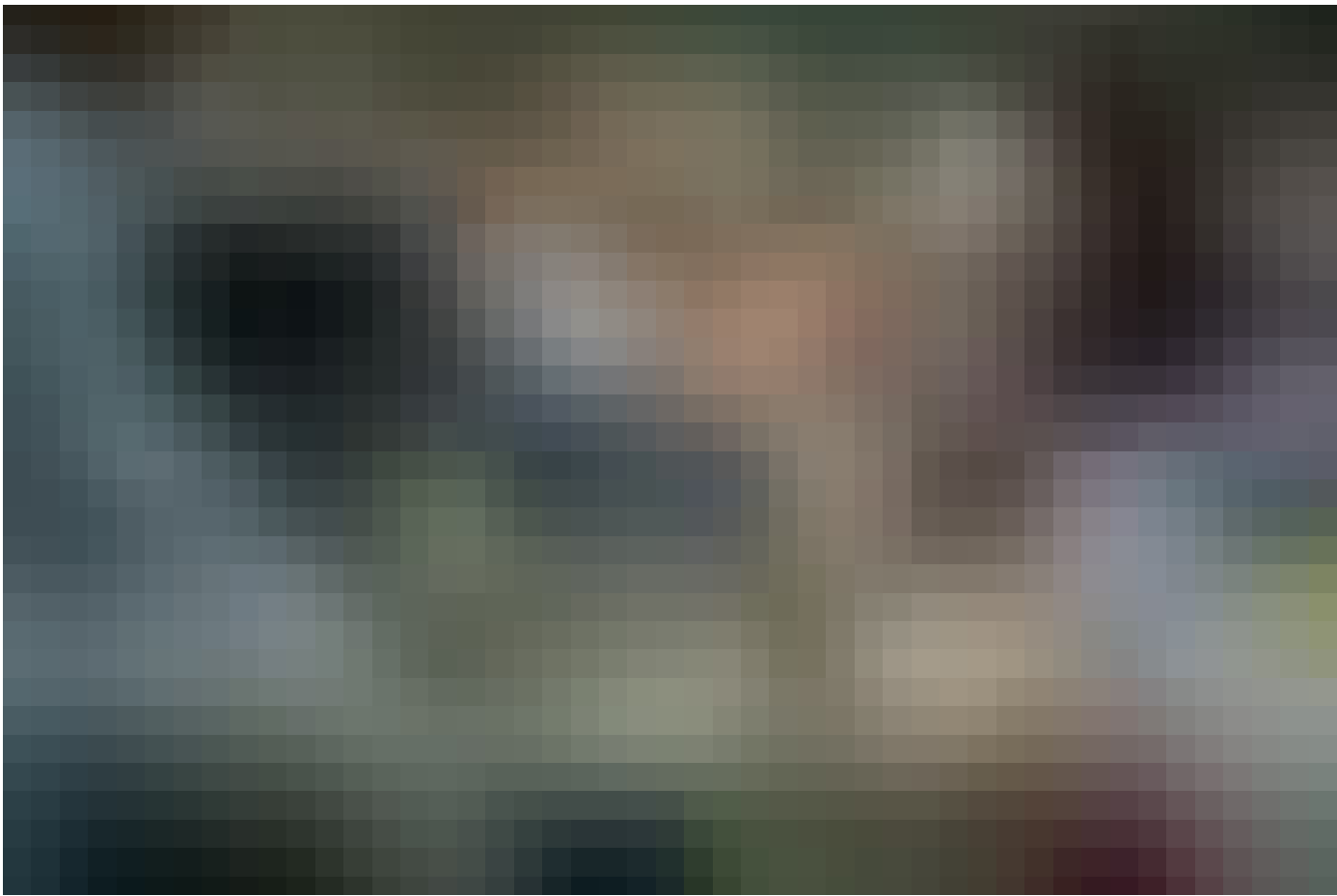
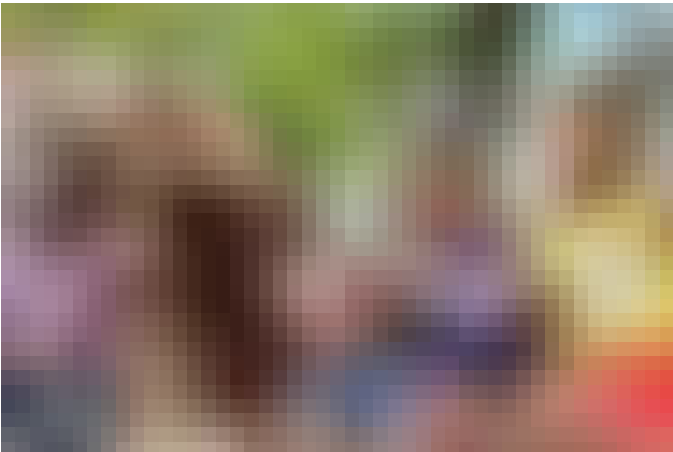
*Ribbon Cutting 2017 at 66 Noyes Street*

The café is seen not only as an addition to the offerings but as a necessary development to meet the increased visitor numbers and the needs of the community. "We're building a café because we now have the volume of visitors to support it," says Barrett. "It took us five years to reach this level. Before, everyone brought their own food and drink. Now, we can offer tea and coffee service, as well as prepared foods like breakfast sandwiches, sandwiches, and salads for lunchtime, and soon even dinner options."

The Portland Community Squash Center (PSC) is setting new standards in the financing of community facilities. With an innovative approach to membership models that include tiered rates for financially disadvantaged individuals, the center has built an impressive membership base of around 700 people. Of these, 500 are active squash players who use and enjoy the facility. Approximately half of PCS memberships are subsidized.

Despite these subsidies, the Portland Squash Community generates an annual revenue of 367,000 dollars with just four squash courts, equating to an impressive annual revenue of nearly 92,000 dollars per court. These revenues enable PSC to fully cover its essential operational costs. Annual philanthropy covers wrap around services such as academic support, travel, wellness programs, mentorship, and social events.

Barrett Takesian is happy to share his experiences and insights with new organizations, emphasizing the importance of starting with basic, affordable offerings. "Just start with affordable court availability and introductory clinics," Takesian advises. He firmly believes that sustainability should be a focus from the beginning. If the community supports and believes in the project, additional services like transportation, catering, and educational support can be gradually added."

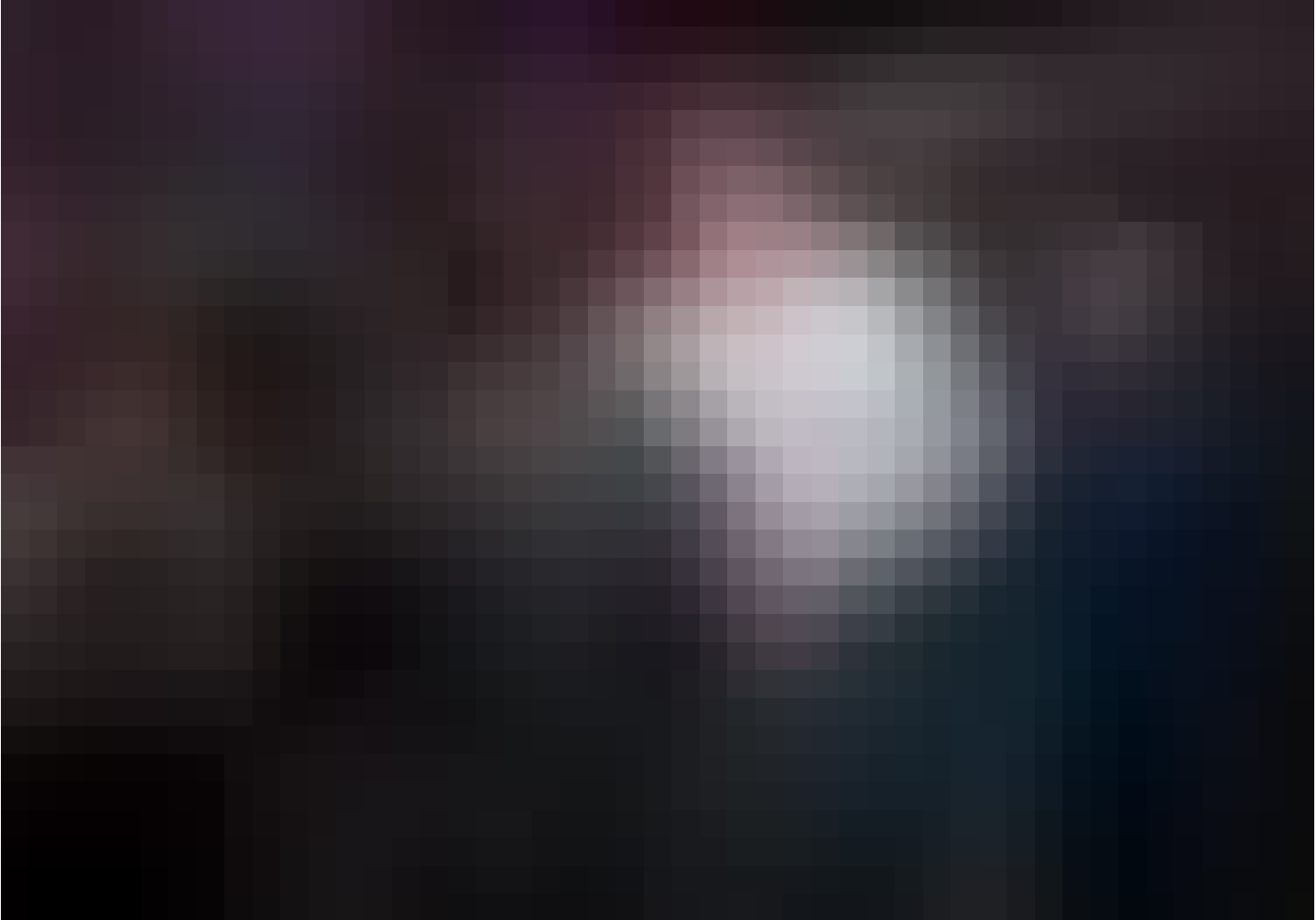
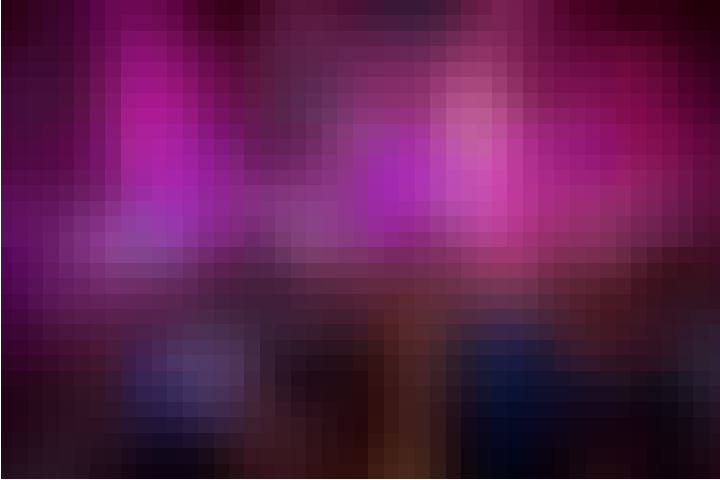


*BBQ at PCS*

Today, PCS goes far beyond mere access to squash. With an annual fundraising goal of 500,000 dollars, it provides a comprehensive support system that meets the needs of its community. "We are located in the middle of an economically diverse city," Takesian explains. The center uses vans to pick up and drop off children, offers academic support for students who need it, and provides free meals to families.

**New Perspectives in Fundraising for Community Squash Centers**

Takesian argues that in the USA, the first facilities were built to serve predominantly affluent or low-income communities. Many of the newer projects are finding a way to serve all socioeconomic groups under one roof. Recent research from Harvard University shows that social connectedness in our communities is the number one corollary to increasing social mobility ([socialcapital.org](https://socialcapital.org)).



*Squash Ball at PCS*

When Takesian evaluates the viability of new community squash centers, he looks for three key ingredients: leadership, start-up capital, and location. For the sport to prosper in a new market, the leadership team must be inspiring and committed to constant community outreach. Second, building a new community center comes with an initial capital investment of \$1-3M for leased spaces and \$4-12M to own. Lastly, most members will come from a two-mile radius, so the location dictates who will use the facility.

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**What can the rest of the world learn from the US**

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Due to the specific tax system in the US, the concept of Community Facilities cannot be translated 1:1 to other countries in the world. However, the method of covering financial investments through donations in the US shows parallels to public facilities in other countries, where the investment is covered by government funds. Therefore, the strategies of the US community facilities can serve as a source of inspiration for the development and operation of these facilities, making them more sustainable, inclusive, and accessible to the entire community.

For those intrigued by the innovative approach of Portland Community Squash (PCS) to community engagement and facility management, a wealth of information awaits at the bottom of their "About Us" page on their website, [www.pcsquash.com/about-us](http://www.pcsquash.com/about-us) . Here, visitors can discover

an open-source book that serves as a comprehensive guide for initiating a community squash center—or indeed, any community-centered initiative.

This resource meticulously outlines the "Best Practices" developed by PCS over the years. These insights provide a behind-the-scenes look at the operational strategies that have enabled PCS to thrive as a community hub. From organizational management to community engagement, these best practices offer valuable lessons for anyone looking to establish a successful community facility.

Equally compelling is the "Theory of Change" section, which acts as both a playbook and a scorecard for the organization. It bridges the gap between the current state of affairs and the envisioned future, offering a strategic framework for achieving significant social impact. This theory outlines the core principles and strategies that drive PCS's efforts to foster an opportunity, relationship, and wellness rich space for their little city in Maine.