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## EXERCISE 23

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# The Playground Negotiation

### INTRODUCTION

This is a true-to-life case. Two elected local officials, one elected on a community involvement plank (herein referred to as the community volunteer representative) and the other elected because of a commitment to support the Parks Department (hereafter referred to as the Parks Department representative) comprise the Ithaca Special Projects Task Force. They have been charged with deciding whether to fund a playground for the community and, if so, how much of the city's limited special project funds they should spend. Other projects requesting funding will be presented to them later in the year. Both representatives share the common goal of bettering the community. However, the issue is complicated by a variety of potential intergroup conflicts that can threaten their position as elected officials, and that could jeopardize the harmony of the community that they are trying to help. Moreover, both representatives are aware that they, as well as their constituents, may have interests in both community volunteerism as well as in the well-being of the Parks Department; for example, Parks Department employees may also be community volunteers after work.

### ADVANCE PREPARATION

Advance preparation will be announced by your instructor. You may be asked to read the Background Information in advance, and prepare for one of several roles in this case scenario.

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

You were elected as (either Parks Department representative or community volunteer representative) to the city council, a position in the local Ithaca government. Recently, you were appointed to the Ithaca Special Projects Task Force (ISPTF). This committee makes recommendations to the full council for funding special projects that will benefit the Ithaca community. The council then provides one-time funding for special projects that are not included in the budgets for any other department. ISPTF does not guarantee ongoing support for the projects it funds; thus, most projects are those that can be completed within one fiscal year.

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Each year the council considers three proposals. These proposals never arrive at the same time and are therefore considered independently from each other. The budget for ISPTF is fixed, and members of the task force must seriously consider the merits of each project as it is presented. Later projects may be more worthy of funding than the current project under consideration; alternatively, the current project may be more promising than either or both of the two later projects, but the ISPTF can't possibly know this at the time of its decision.

### Your Task

You and your task force partner are to consider a proposal for an expanded playground at Titus Flats. This playground will require ISPTF funds, some Parks Department sponsorship (including human resources), and volunteer effort. Titus Flats is a low- to middle-income area across a four-lane street from the enormous Tops Supermarket at the southwest corner of Ithaca. Titus Flats is inland and on the opposite shore of the middle-income Inlet development and recreation area. Currently, Titus Flats is a recreation area with four softball fields, an outdoor basketball court, and a very small playground for children containing a tiny wooden climbing structure, a slide, and a tire swing.

The neighborhood around Titus Flats is home to a culturally diverse population. Across the street from the recreation area is a large public housing facility, Landmark Square. Its residents include welfare families with children and teenagers. These families have often borne the brunt of malicious stereotyping based on their socioeconomic status and their race, predominantly African American. They would prefer not to be seen as a source of trouble. At the same time, they do not wish to see their interests and needs ignored.

Adjacent to the park is a senior citizens' housing facility, Titus Towers. The residents here are functioning members of the community, doing their shopping and socializing in the neighborhood. Because of the proximity of the "Flats" to the "Towers," residents have come to view the area as an extension of their own grounds.

The surrounding neighborhood is low- to moderate-income single-family housing. These property owners pay more taxes than any of the other members of the neighborhood and expect to have a voice in how their neighborhood is managed. They are concerned about their liability for children playing in the streets and sidewalks in front of their homes, since Ithaca laws state that sidewalks in front of private homes are the owners' responsibility, and many children live in the area.

The different members of the community all make use of the existing park. The children of Landmark Square and the single-family property owners use the small playground. In addition, seniors from the Towers occasionally bring visiting grandchildren to play. The playground gets overcrowded during peak after-school and weekend hours, and as a result, young children can often be found playing in the street. Although there has not yet been an automobile accident causing serious injury to a child, parents and City Council members are concerned about the possibility of such a tragedy in the future.

While there is support for a safe place for children to play, all parties are concerned that a larger playground could become a magnet for teenage gang activity and drug dealers. Some parents have already indicated that they keep their children away

from the playground because of the "tough" teens on the basketball court. The Landmark Square teenagers and young adults use the basketball court heavily. It is rare when a game is not in progress.

Finally, impromptu ball games are sometimes organized by the residents at Landmark Square, but the fields are mainly used by citywide softball leagues and thus are unavailable throughout the season. In addition, many residents of Titus Towers complain that the playground is already too noisy and the basketball games are raucous and profane, and the residents say that they cannot enjoy sitting quietly on the benches that were provided for such use.

The Parks Department claims that it does not have enough money to build a new playground in an area where one already exists and that there are more pressing needs for its shrinking funds.

Ithaca is a town (some like to call it a small city) of about 30,000 year-round inhabitants. Students from the several colleges in the area almost double Ithaca's size during the school term, but very few of them choose to make Titus Flats their home. Ithaca also has several wealthy neighborhoods, two neighborhoods surrounding its largest colleges, and a downtown shopping area called The Commons that attracts tourists and well-to-do consumers. Each neighborhood has at least one children's playground. Two of these were built almost entirely by community volunteers, as was the Ithaca Science Center. The Commons also has a graceful wooden structure for children to play on while their parents shop or work downtown.

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR EVERYONE

### Playground Options

There are two options for building a playground and three options for a ground cover. These options can be implemented in a variety of ways, with costs depending on the particular elements chosen. Each option has advantages and drawbacks. You are to consider these options and negotiate with your task force partner in determining a recommendation for the City Council.

Keep in mind that you and your task force partner do not have vested interests in the options or alternatives you read about in the proposals. Also keep in mind that this playground is just one of three proposals that the city will ask you to consider funding during the year. The two representatives share a common goal: the betterment of community life in Ithaca through the wise and efficient use of ISPTF funds.

### Goals

Your roles are intentionally vague. It is important for you to put yourself in the shoes of this task force member, to be creative and responsive as if you were actually in this situation. Experience has shown that role-players with detailed guidelines pay too much attention to what they should do rather than to what they could do.

The ISPTF is empowered to make recommendations about the funding of this playground only. It does not have the power to levy or even to depend on fines, fees, taxes, or large donations.

### Budget Considerations

The budget for all three special projects for this year is \$63,750. The first of the three projects to be proposed this year is a playground. You may choose to recommend that the City Council spend the entire \$63,750 on this one playground project; not fund a playground at all; or recommend any other amount be granted, below, equal to, or above the amount requested.

Remember that the council considers three special projects a year, although at the present time you know nothing about the nature of the other two later proposals. These other projects may be more or less deserving of funding than this project. You cannot know for sure.

Money that is not used this year is returned to Ithaca's general budget and is not added to the ISPTF's budget the following year. In fact, moneys not used may be seen as superfluous, and may cause ISPTF to receive less money the next year.

You and your task force partner must make the best decision you can within these limitations, keeping in mind your responsibility to the public trust, the merits of this particular proposal, the limits of the special projects budget, and the unknown concerning other projects that will be proposed later this year. Over the past two years, the council funded special projects as follows:

#### Special Projects (Two Years Ago)

<i>Project Title</i>	<i>Amount Requested</i>	<i>Amount Granted</i>
Inlet exercise path	\$31,675	\$24,900
Lighting Improvements, The Commons	\$59,100	\$42,850
Seed money, Science Center	\$10,000	\$ 9,450
Total budget for the year		\$77,200

#### Special Projects (Last Year)

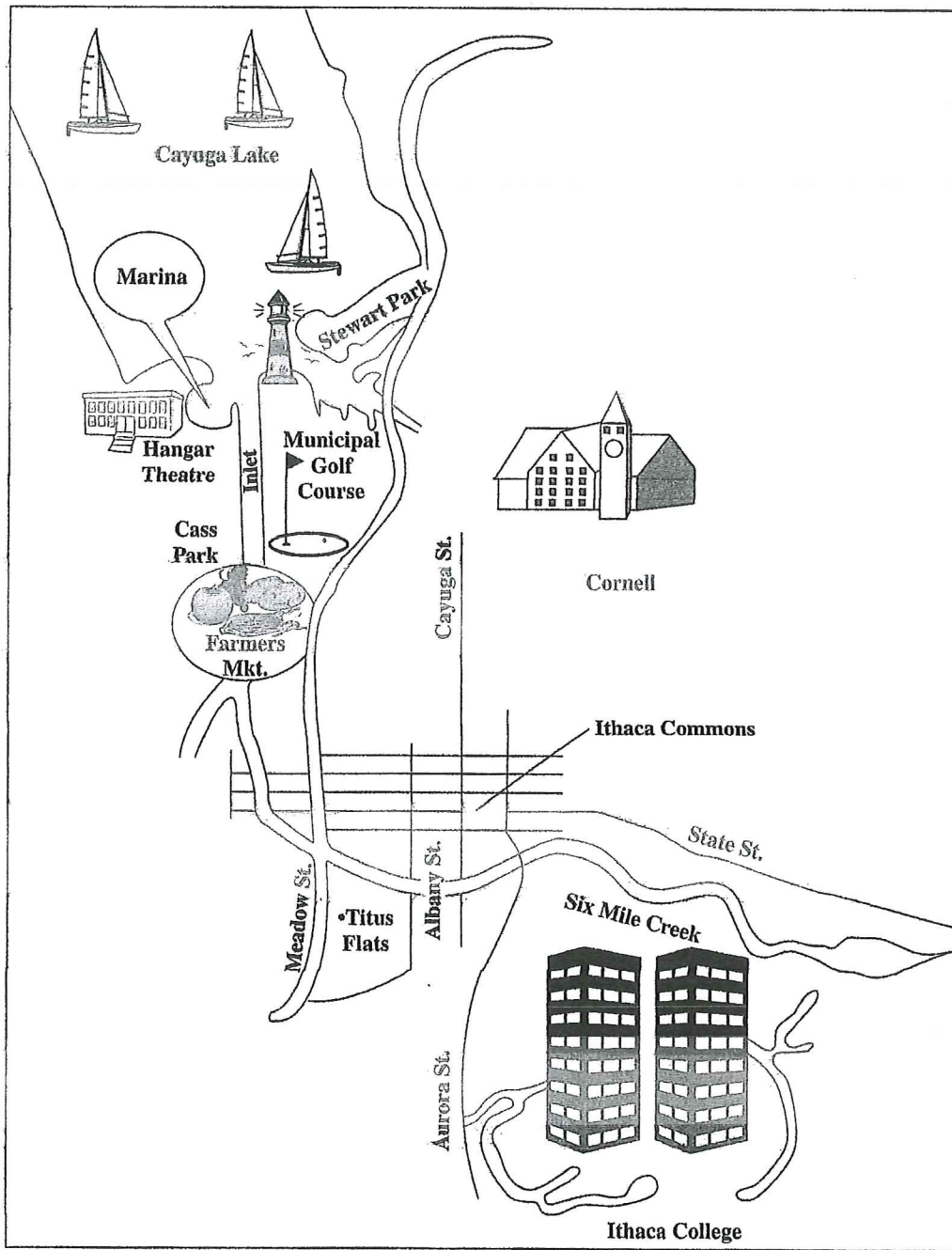
<i>Project Title</i>	<i>Amount Requested</i>	<i>Amount Granted</i>
The Commons renovation	\$68,976	\$57,145
Landscaping, Stewart Park	\$10,000	\$14,300
Bike lanes, State Street	\$26,800	0
Total budget for the year		\$71,445

### Descriptions of Past Projects

See Figure 1 for a map of Ithaca, highlighting the locations of past projects.

**Inlet Exercise Path.** The inlet area of Ithaca is a lovely greenway that sits astride a channel leading from Six Mile Creek to Lake Cayuga. It is home to two college crew teams, a community theater, a pool and skating rink, tennis courts, ball

FIGURE 1 Map of Ithaca, New York, Highlighting Areas Improved by the ISPTF



fields and picnic areas, a marina, and a covered outdoor market. The ISPTF provided funds for a cardiovascular exercise course that can also be used for bicycling, running, walking, and roller or in-line skating. It is open to everyone, without charge. It is most easily accessible by automobile.

**Lighting Improvements and Renovations, Ithaca Commons.** The Commons is an outdoor, downtown pedestrian mall featuring upscale boutiques, specialty shops, restaurants, and bars. When business proprietors suggested that customers would stay away in the evenings because of concerns about safety, the city installed new lights on the mall through ISPTF funding. The next year the ISPTF also made available funds to renovate a play structure for children, repair benches and other seating, and commission a public work of art.

**Seed Money, Science Center.** The Science Center is a highly visible organization in the Ithaca community that enjoys widespread support. After years of temporary quarters and mobile exhibits (including a regular one at a nearby covered market), the Science Center built a permanent home with seed money provided by the ISPTF. Located on the outskirts of a moderate-income area of private homes and small businesses, the building was erected with volunteer labor over several weekends.

**Landscaping, Stewart Park.** Stewart Park is a large park at the south end of Cayuga Lake, adjacent to the municipal golf course. Although the park is owned by the city, it is utilized by a regional population. The park is also home to part of the Ithaca Festival, a summer celebration of music and the arts that draws several thousand people every year. ISPTF funding helped with planting bushes and renovating flower beds, as well as reworking fences and decks around the ponds and pavilions.

**State Street Bike Lanes.** This project was not funded. The proposal called for bike lanes along a treacherous bus and automobile artery from Cornell University through a commercial district to the inlet exercise path. The proposal would have eliminated parking along the route, which is bordered by low-rent student apartments, inexpensive restaurants and bars, used furniture stores, and other businesses that make heavy use of on-street parking.

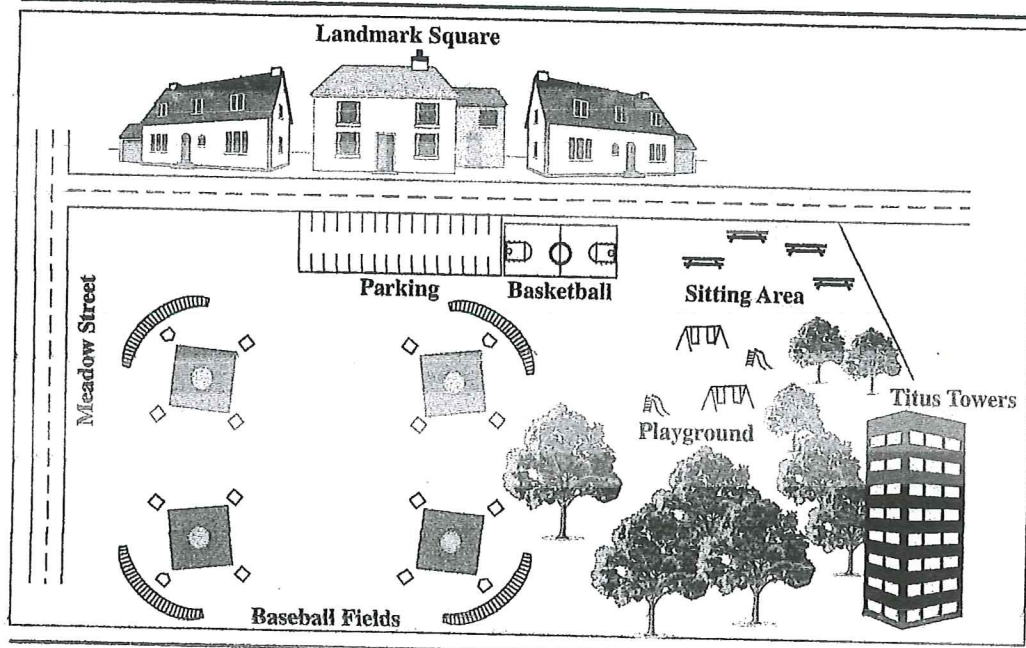
## TITUS FLATS PLAYGROUND PROPOSAL

The proposal is summarized below. The parties proposing the playground have presented two options for equipment and three for ground covers. These options can be mixed and matched, and are presented as guidelines so that task force members will know what can be done at different levels of funding. See Figure 2 for a map of the existing park and playground.

### Equipment

**Option One.** Price range: \$40,360–\$46,100. A ready-to-assemble metal-and-vinyl playground can be purchased from a supplier in Illinois. The unit is manufac-

FIGURE 2 Map of Titus Flats Park



tured in Korea and imported to the United States. Assembly would be accomplished easily by Ithaca Parks personnel. This unit is estimated to last for 15 years, and maintenance would include paint touch-ups to prevent rust corrosion and replacement of vinyl parts after 7 years. Cost of replacement is estimated to be approximately \$5,000–\$6,500 (above the original purchase price), although it is difficult to foresee the effects of changes in inflation and exchange rates, oil prices (affecting the cost of the vinyl), and so on. At the present time, Ithaca has no playgrounds constructed of similar materials, although many other cities the size of Ithaca use these units extensively. There is some concern that these metal units are not as attractive as the wooden units used throughout the town, and one city council member has stated his opposition to erecting structures which are not in “harmony” with the other parks.

The cost of the structure ranges with size. The low estimate calls for one slide, one play platform, six swings, monkey bars, a fire fighter’s pole, and an elevated crawl-through tunnel. The high estimate calls for two regular slides, one twisting slide, 10 swings, four platforms, monkey bars, a jungle gym, two elevated tunnels, a fire fighter’s pole, and a climbing rope. Units of intermediate size can be ordered by omitting different parts.

**Option Two.** Price range: \$34,600–\$39,800. A custom-designed wood structure can be built on the spot. The plans would be drawn up by a local contractor who has designed and built several playground facilities in the city. Substantial savings could be achieved by using donated community labor. Even so, skilled carpenters would have to be hired and much of the materials purchased. Similar community efforts have been successful in renovating the playground at Belle Sherman School and building a new facility at Southside Community Center. However, each of those projects had a constituent community with a strong interest in contributing their time and efforts not

only to construction activities, but also in providing food, child care for the workers, and a considerable amount of time in organizing the project and procuring labor and donated materials. You are not sure that the community surrounding Titus Flats would be as supportive as these other communities. One possibility is that a part-time coordinator may have to be hired for an additional cost of \$3,000–\$5,000.

Maintenance includes minor structural repair each year, easily accomplished by Parks personnel. Even so, wooden structures usually have nicked and rough boards which can inflict minor abrasions and splinters on the children. Every four to five years, major structural replacement would be required to replace rotting, loose, or broken boards and corroded or loose bolts. This maintenance could not be handled solely by Parks Department employees. Additional personnel from the community would be required for this work, involving periodic organizing of donated labor and resources. Because the extent of wear and tear on the facility cannot be anticipated, the cost of periodic maintenance cannot be estimated. The contractor calculates the life of such a unit, properly maintained, to be 20 years.

The range in cost depends on the size of the unit desired. The low estimate calls for four swings, a tire swing, a “suspension bridge” between two play platforms, a fire fighter’s pole, monkey bars, and a small toddler’s slide. The high estimate includes six swings, two tire swings, three suspension bridges between four play platforms, a tower with a turret, four seesaws, one toddler’s slide, one twister slide, one large slide with three bumps, a balance beam, monkey bars, a climbing wall, and two fire fighter’s poles. Units of intermediate size can be ordered by omitting different parts.

### Ground Preparation

If you choose to recommend to the ISPTF that a playground should be constructed, you must recommend an appropriate ground cover for the area as well as the type of playground structure. Again there are several options, and you must consider such factors as additional cost, maintenance, and safety.

**Option One.** Price range: \$4,580–\$5,150. Pea gravel (small, rounded, smoothed stones) can be used to cover the playground. Advantages to this covering include the following: it is relatively permanent, it requires little maintenance, and it is clean because dirt and debris would sift through the gravel. Many Ithaca playgrounds use this for ground cover. One disadvantage, in addition to its relatively high cost, is that children who fall on it may get abrasions. Other concerns are that small children may swallow it, and it can be dangerous when thrown.

**Option Two.** Price range: \$3,320–\$3,700. Sand is a possible ground cover. It provides a soft medium that would reduce injuries if children fall from the structure. Sand also furnishes an additional play medium for children using toy dump trucks, shovels and buckets, and so on. Sand requires more maintenance than gravel, and additional sand would have to be spread each year. It is also not as clean as gravel, and some parents claim that cats and other animals would be attracted to the sand, thereby posing possible health and cleanliness risks.

**Option Three.** Price range: \$850-\$925. Following construction of the play structure, the ground could simply be leveled and grass could be planted. Maintenance would be minimal and could be handled by regular Parks maintenance crews. However, heavily trafficked areas would become hard-packed, and no grass would grow in those areas. Hard-packed ground would also yield more extensive injuries if a child should fall from the structure. Because of Ithaca's rainy climate, there is concern that the poor drainage qualities of this ground preparation would frequently reduce the park to a mud pit. This drawback could be dealt with by combining grass with chipped bark or shredded recycled tires in heavy traffic areas. This would result in an added cost of \$1,000 initially and yearly replenishment costs. There is also a high probability that loose materials will get spread over grassy areas, creating mowing problems and giving the playground a messy appearance if not meticulously maintained.