

RECREATION ADVISORY BOARD

MINUTES

AUGUST 25, 2021

(PENDING BOARD APPROVAL)

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Jeff Battles, Carl Brown, Sherisse Malone, David Miles, Brantley Pittman, Ryan Stanford, Jay Wilkoff

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Irene Pate and Rodney Lawrence

VACANT POSITIONS:

District 1 and District 3

CITY STAFF PRESENT:

Holli Browder, Becky Glisson, Teresa Snellings, and Carson Revell

A meeting of the Recreation Advisory Board was held on Wednesday, August 25th, with the meeting being called to order by Holli Browder at 12:10.

ROLL CALL WAS COMPLETED

Holli gave a brief update as to Matt Lensch being new Aquatics Division Manager and stated his qualifications and how fortunate we are to have him. Also mentioned that Division Managers Tommy Groce and Samantha Thies could not be in attendance today.

STAFF UPDATES:

Athletics: (Carson Revell)

We started our adult softball league last week at South Commons. Our numbers have been a little lower due to Covid but are still holding steady.

We have the Carve/Spencer football game this weekend at Memorial Stadium. We have about 10 high school games in total.

Youth Sports have all finished registering and will start their seasons next month after Labor Day.

Cooper Creek Tennis Center is still very short staffed. We have done interviews but have not been able to get anyone hired. If you know anyone that is looking and would be a good fit at Cooper Creek, please let us know. We are short 6 total positions currently.

Aquatics:

Becky reported that Aquatics is very busy right now. We are currently working on high school season and getting those contracts done. Jeff is working on those with us. Participation is picking but up but still not where we need and want to be.

Community Schools:

Becky reported that Community Schools Division Manager, Sam Thies, has managed to acquire a few more after school programs that we had last year, and she is still working on those. She has been another great asset and it is going really well. We have several sites quarantined right now due to Covid, so Sam is working through those issues.

Park Services:

Becky wanted to let the board know that we are desperately short on equipment, resources, and staff. We have no trash truck drivers at all right now, we are not getting as many inmates as we used to and are not getting the same quality of inmates that we used to. Equipment and vehicles are poor to delapidated. So, trash is not being picked up to our normal standard, parks are not being cut as normal as well as other functions in the parks. It is not fault of the staff we have as they are doing their very best with what they have. Also explained that Public Works has contracted with a private vendor to help them with trash pickup but that does not include the parks. Tommy just wanted the board to be aware in case you receive any calls.

Recreation (Teresa Snellings)

Teresa shared that like other divisions, we are short staffed and face issues as well. The Recreation and Senior Centers are back open. Everyone is back open. We are still doing restrictions and or changes due to the Covid. We are still not providing access for people to just come sit around. Water fountains are still closed, and we are checking into water bottles stations. We are not letting as many people in as used to be. Masks are still required in all City buildings.

Britt David Studio is fully staffed, and they are operating as normal and doing fine.

Ma Rainey limits the number of visitors and it is doing okay as well.

We are down 20 staff and Teresa has gone to as many job fairs as she can to try to get staff and have not had any luck. Most people want full time and all of hers vacant positions are part time.

Board members introduced themselves and their districts.**Holli Browder:**

Stated again that staffing is down. Teresa needs about 20. The facilities usually have 1 full time and 4 part time staff. Currently Teresa has 1 full time and 1 part time at each center. That should give you an indication of where we are now. She reiterated that Teresa cannot find people to interview.

In addition, Community Schools is suffering with not having enough staff and it is a huge problem. We need staff to keep our ratio which we always make sure that we stay within.

Other areas of concern with staff are as Carson said in Athletics and Cooper Creek.

Carver Park has been in the news recently more times than we would like. If you recall, we talked at last meeting about Carver Park being changed to close at 7pm. Even still we are finding that things are happening before those hours. This is not something that the department can do anything about as we do not have Park Rangers. We do work with the police department and the sheriff's department as much as possible, but we still see things that occur.

We work closely with the police department and the sheriff's department with cameras. Currently the department has 302 cameras. These are mostly in our recreation centers and facilities. We have a committee that has recently been formed that is looking at ways to improve camera systems and make sure the police department has access to those cameras.

We had originally decided to have the Veteran's Day and Christmas Parade. We are still planning on having them, but we are on hold right now to see what the Covid numbers will be. We usually have 15 to 30 thousand people in attendance at these parades so that would be a super spreader for the city. So, we will have to wait and see.

We told you guys last time that we would have some funds leftover from the budget. We should know that number in September and will let you know. It's trending in the million to the two-million-dollar mark that we did not spend.

As Teresa mentioned earlier, we are short on staff. So, we are not doing facility rentals. It is because of Covid but not because of Covid, not directly. We just have no staff and cannot cover the hours that we have.

We are running into issues with paint. Construction costs are at an all-time high. But field marking paint is hard to come by and if we get it, it is 6 times the normal cost. This will impact our budget. We will not do practice fields at this time and we are not doing as much as we used to.

Becky mentioned the problems we are having such as cutting the parks. Holli thinks she has mentioned this before, but we utilize inmates to cut our parks. Mentioned that we get anywhere from 4 to 18 where we used to get 40 to 60.

We have seen a huge rise in our employees quarantining as has several places around the city, community, and city employees.

On October 6th we will be hosting our GRPA District Banquet here in Columbus. This board usually gets an invite so we will be sending those out soon. We usually have about 60 people attending this.

Later in November we will be hosting our statewide conference here. That is a bid process, and we were selected to be one of three cities that will now be on a rotating schedule to host

conference. Other two cities are Jekyll Island and Athens. People come in on Sunday and it ends on Thursday. 500 attendees are what we typically see.

In September we have a GRPA Board of Trustees meeting here in Columbus. This will be the 7th and 8th. Usually around 40 people attend this one.

We found out towards the end of the summer out that our Therapeutic Section won a national award through the National Association of County Parks and Recreation Officials (NACPRO). It is called the "Removing Barrier Awards". They will go to Council to receive the award soon for their program called "Extraordinary News." The participants created their own news station.

Huge thank you to Sherisse for getting a complaint and answering it like she did. The complaint basically was about things that we could not do. She replied with funding, staffing, etc. and her email was perfect!

We are going for a SPLOST. City employees cannot advocate for or against it. If you guys could help with this, it would be great. Our portion would be about 48 million and the money would go towards a laundry list of things we need. We have identified several parks, Lakebottom, Theo McGhee, Benning Park, Cooper Creek, Woodruff Farm Soccer Complex as parks we would like to address in major ways. Carver Park is another one. In addition to that we would also like to rebuild the pools at Psalmond Road and Shirley Winston. We would like to add splash pads around the community. We also would like to address bathrooms, signage, trails, and miscellaneous receipts in the parks. That is the short version of what the 48 million would go to.

We have been working with Trees Columbus and Star Whitehouse (landscape architect firm) They are well known for doing Central Park and work out of Atlanta. We are working with them on Lakebottom first and then Theo McGhee. We put out a survey trying to get input. The last time they did a survey was in Roswell and they got a couple of hundred hits. We received 2400. So much so that we have had national organizations reach out to us as to how we got people to answer surveys. Of the 2400, 80 % answered every single question on the survey. It was a lengthy survey. We are in the process of working with Star Whitehouse to try to make some improvements. One is a connector for the Dragonfly trail so you can ride the trail all the way through. Midtown, Inc. is also working with us on this. Holli expanded on how this would work with this money and SPLOST money. Our SPLOST is tied to the new judicial building. If anyone wants more information, email her and she will send you the info.

Jay Wilkoff asked about the Plaque at Memorial Stadium. It is John House's project and Holli believes that Councilor House has found the funding and is working on the plaque. We will have a ceremony soon for it. Mr. Wilkoff inquired as to whether it would be standing or hung. Holli advised that she does not know what was decided. Holli said if it does hang it will be on the south side of the stadium. If it is going in the ground, it will be in the same south side to the left of the ticket booth. Holli further explained area that it would be put and had more discussion as to final decision not known at this time.

Brantley inquired about fountains in the parks. Holli explained that they are looking at it now. They would like to take away the fountains and put in bottle filling stations. Holli advises that

the fountains are all on or at least are in the process. Also inquired as to the bathrooms. Holli advised that the leagues open and close those and we do not. We keep them locked to try to keep down vandalism. Holli said for example the bathrooms at the skateboard park. They fixed them and the next week they had to fix them again and on and on. They tore out the whole commode. This is what happened to the bathroom under the bridge. Uptown controls that and keeps it closed except for large events.

Holli advised that 23rd Street bathrooms has been part of a land swap with the Housing Authority. As they do the new housing there, the 23rd street pavilion and bathroom will be closed. They will still have access to the Riverwalk but no bathrooms. They continually destroyed these bathrooms and was always used for homeless.

Brantley asked about the outsourcing of the trash pickup and would this include the parks. Holli advised that Public Works in the past three weeks has partnered with us and have loaned us an employee and have given us a truck. So, we were running two trucks and two drivers a few days a week. The plan is to ask for a new trash truck through the American Rescue Plan. When they do that, we have asked that their employee become a permanent employee of our department. We must pull someone to drive a trash truck. Not everyone in our department can drive one because not all have a CDL. It is very hard to find staff that have a CDL, so we can't just pull anyone to drive a trash truck and we do not have a driver in our department right now. More discussion held as to using other staff to drive the trash truck. It is a 7 day a week job and when we have an employee, they work 7 days a week.

Brantley inquired about the recreation centers being short staffed and questioned whether we had to shorten hours. Holli advised that we had to shorten the hours at all our facilities including the recreation centers. It was partially covid related and partially the staff. It is not because of covid numbers but due to not having staff during covid. So yes, we did have to adjust hours daily.

Teresa noted that we only close them one hour a day so that staff can sanitize the facilities. Holli added that we must maintain 29 hours for all part timers and if we work them over so many hours per year, we must pay them health insurance. So, we don't have any choice but to shorten hours. Question was asked can we not work them over 29 due to shortage and Holli advised that we could not do this due to federally having to consider them more than a part time employee. Holli further explained when this changed, how it changed and that if Teresa worked an employee for 40 hours one week, she would have to adjust the next week.

Brantley asked about the project to expand the cross park on the Riverwalk at 11th and Bay. Holli advised that It is where the down and back is. That part is being renovated and changed. We are hoping that the project wasn't going to be done soon because in the SPLOST, that is one of the first on the list. Holli explained how the SPLOST money worked and that the money would only be over a period of 10 years. So, we will not have to wait the 10 years on our projects. Once the money starts coming in. If things continue as they are right now, even though it is a pay as you go program, they don't believe it will take us the full 10 years to complete all projects. Holli doesn't think it will take the entire 10 years to get all the money. There are too many other departments that need the money as well. We have talked about

this and applying for additional grant funding that we might can do that because that is our most hated bathroom. The biggest thing will be, we would like to go into that new renovation and expansion. So, you can't see them now because the way they face.

The new format will be that the bathroom will be built on top and will face the CSU building. So, they can be watched. Other part is that we would no longer have sinks in the bathrooms. All the sinks will be built on the outside. The homeless use the sinks to take a bath and wash their clothes. So, the idea is to simply have them as restrooms and have the sinks elsewhere. Board member Stanford added that this is a trend in a lot of new facilities and parks. Holli answered that everything will be in stainless. Holli gave an example of how New Orleans uses all stainless and she has learned that it can all be torn up and vandalized. Our process will be that it will look like you are going into a prison cell. It will be as tough as we can get.

Holli shared that she was in California and few years and Colorado a couple of years ago and toured their restrooms to see what other people were doing. Holli mentioned several things that we would like to do such as make cards to get in, locks, etc. She is questioning other agencies as a director, what can she do about these issues? Holli shared different ideas she has as to replacing restrooms.

Holli added that Flatrock park is another on the list for bathrooms. Currently we are looking at different things to do with those. When you come into the park, the City owns the two buildings. We want to turn those into bathrooms. The park is nothing but rock and it does not have a sewer system. To do some of the things we want to do, it is rather costly because it is nothing but rock and would have to be drilled to do the things we want to do. So, we can take those buildings and make them restrooms. Holli asked explained what they are and talked about compostable restrooms. A lot of places put them in. We are trying to look at different things in Flatrock.

Brantley inquired as to what we are doing to get our employees vaccinated. Holli advised we have done some incentives such as giving employees time off to get vaccinated. We are giving employees half a day off next Friday to get vaccinated. We gave everyone time off if you got vaccinated. We gave them four hours off if they got vaccinated. We gave them umpteen chances to get vaccinated. We offered free clinics to get folks vaccinated. So, all our employees had plenty of opportunities to go. We are roughly 200 to 250 employees and we probably have around 30% of our employees vaccinated.

We are in a you state with a governor who is not a supporter of checking numbers or masks, etc. LSU Football rule is now that if you want to go to a football game, you must have a vaccination or a clean covid test done within 72 hours of coming to the game. There are some states that are going to that. So, to answer the question as to us trying to get our employees to get the vaccination, the answer is yes. We have done all we can feasibly do within our constraints.

David asked if there was somewhere that they could get the information for SPLOST so they can share it and show people why it would benefit Parks and Recreation. Holli advised that if you go to the City's website, it is on the main page. Everything that has been discussed by

department and by area is out there. It doesn't go into exact detail about what we are doing, it is just general information. Holli explained the information and what can and cannot be advertised. Holli also explained how we get input from the citizens as to what they want from us.

Board member asked about pickleball courts. Holli explained about the private funding we have received and the number of pickleball courts we want and extensive details about a holistic recreational facility. Such as shuffleboard, horseshoes, etc. We are also discussing different properties around the city as to where to put them. They are not all park properties, but they will be home to pickleball courts. We have always wanted pickleball and have tried for years. We just need the money to do it. We now have people in the community that want to help with pickleball. She really wants the facility to be more than a pickleball facility with other amenities. We must think about things in a way that we will have more than one thing. We don't have the money to do different things here and there so we will try to get them in one place.

Teresa also advised the board that we have pickleball courts inside at Carver Park and Northside Recreation Centers. They are not well used, and she is not sure how many citizens know about them, but this is a good place for them to play in the winter and when kids are in school.

Board member asked if the City is confident in the 48 million from SPLOST. Holli is not sure but shared that 48 million is just a drop in the bucket of what we need. We actually need the entire SPLOST. Our oldest recreation center is almost 80 years old, and our youngest will be 20 years old next year. Board member asked how about Comer's age and Holli advised that it was the one that was 80 years old. It was recently renovated and so was Tillis that is also one of our oldest. Comer doesn't get as much use as the other centers, so it is in much better shape. The others get a lot of use and are not in the best shape.

With a community as large as our we should be putting money back into the rec centers. Jeff Battles can tell you and we really appreciate Jeff because he helps us out as much as he can on the school district side, but the school district gets all the money. They have built the new facilities such as schools, football fields, etc. and we have not been able to build anything new. We would like to redo our existing facilities. That's where we need the money. For example, Woodruff Park and Benning Park. Both of those facilities need to be enhanced so we can hold more tournaments for the city.

Jeff Battles commented on the dug outs and how they are in bad shape and Holli stated that some parents can help, and some cannot. So, some are in worse shape than others.

Board member stated that this board can promote the SPLOST for the department. This SPLOST will help us and our Parks and Recreation department in the long run. This board can sell those things and how it will help our families. Holli reiterated this and spoke about how people will come back to the parks if we are able to do these enhancements.

David mentioned that parks also bring revenue and quality of life issues for people coming into this city such as investors. Holli said it does and gave an example of Lakebottom and other

places and basically it is economic development, and the Chamber has been supportive to us as well because they know that quality of life brings economic development to the city. It will bring more business to Columbus and bring more businesses back.

Holli apologized for going over an hour but wanted to make sure the board was informed on everything going on in the department and appreciates the board coming and what they do for our department.

With no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 1:40 pm.

Minutes recorded by Becky Glisson.