

MINUTES
MAYOR'S BLUE RIBBON COMMITTEE ON THE
SAGAMORE CREEK LAND
7:00 P.M. – Thursday, May 7, 2015
City Hall – Council Chambers

1. CALL TO ORDER:

Chairman Spear called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Members Present:

Councilor Eric Spear, Chair

Councilor Chris Dwyer John

John Mikolajczyk, Resident

Lennie Mullaney, School Representative

Alison Pyott, Resident

Kory Sirmaian, Recreation Board Representative

Allison Tanner, Conservation Commission Representative

Staff Present:

David Moore, Community Development Director, City Manager Designee

Rus Wilson, Recreation Department/Athletic Director

Peter Rice, Public Works Director

2. Consideration of Minutes – April 8, 2015

Ms. Tanner moved to accept the minutes as presented, seconded by Ms. Pyott. Motion passed unanimously.

3. Introduction to meeting – Chair

Chairman Spear welcomed everyone and explained that the purpose of the meeting is to obtain feedback from the community on the Draft Vision and Guidelines, which the committee presented after meeting several times over the last several months.

David Moore, Community Development Director and Ex-officio member of the Committee designated by City Manager Bohenko gave a presentation on the Committee's work and reviewed the draft vision and guidelines. After the presentation, the Chair opened the public input session.

4. Public Input Session on Draft Vision and Guidelines

Kent LePage – stated this will be the third time this land has been looked at in the last several years as it had been considered as a location for the Middle School. He continued that this land has been used by locals for many years for passive recreation but also hundreds of years ago by the Abenaki and other local Native American tribes. He continued that the State of New Hampshire has done little in recognition of the Native heritage in the State and feels that this could be incorporated as a part of this process. He stated he does not want to see just a plaque, but would like to see it incorporated in the educational curriculum and possible a blue ribbon committee formed.

Shaun Rafferty – read a previously submitted e-mail statement highlighting the various passive activities enjoyed over the years and feels that if the City can find a place to build another parking garage then we can find a place to build more playing fields and still preserve the conservation land.

He stated he would like the rest of the speakers to indicate whether or not they have actually walked the property or not.

Rick Becksted - discussed the need for more recreational fields in the city as there have been no new fields added in 35 years. He stated that the youth need to be considered and feels that the understanding after the joint meeting was that everyone was in agreement with putting a field on the cap area. He continued that Recreation Director Rus Wilson has indicated that access would not be a problem. He concluded by stating that his daughter is a lacrosse player and there are no dedicated fields for that sport and feels that the City needs to support its athletes and follow the recommendations made in the Recreational Needs Study which has yet to be followed.

John (disc golf advocate from State Street) and Dennis (disc golf advocate from Dover) – discussed the possibility of having a disc golf course on the land as the topography only enhances the game. They continued that they have had success in Dover and Rochester on publicly-owned land and the environmental impact is minimal if any. They concluded that the sport is low cost, low impact, accessible to all and urged the Committee to consider the possibility.

Mark Tanner - stated he has utilized the property for many years and feels it is a pristine, one of a kind property that should remain the way it is now.

Nancy Johnson – stated that she enjoys the property often and does see other people whenever she goes and sometimes there is not enough parking. She continued that she likes the current proposal and feels that as a taxpayer, she would support turf on existing fields. She also feels that signage needs to be added so that people know where to enter the property and to highlight the various flora and fauna and vernal pools. She concluded that the property is virtually litter free because people love and take care of the property.

Nancy Novelline Clayburgh – School Board representative to the Recreation Board - asked the Committee to reconsider the recommendation of not including the field on the cap area. She continued to reiterate the urgent need of fields in the City of Portsmouth. She concluded that the comment that there is other land available does not help the taxpayers of Portsmouth, as this property is already owned by the City and there are larger issues coming up such as the Wastewater Treatment Facility that will need to be paid for as well.

Barbara McMillan – Conservation Commission member, read into the record a letter from Conservation Commission Chairman Steve Miller in support of the Committee recommendations. She stated that she herself strongly supports the vision and guidelines as they have taken into account the potential impacts of other uses. She concluded by stating that this piece of property ranked highly on the Public Undeveloped Land Assessment study completed in 2011.

Mike MacDonald – stated he supports putting a field on the cap portion of the land stating that as the President of Seacoast LaCrosse, which is a regional program, half of the participants are from Portsmouth but they only use Portsmouth fields 20% of the time due to low availability.

MaryAnn Blanchard – stated she has lived here for many years and raised 4 children who have all been involved in recreational activities and sports but she is also a member of the Conservation Commission and feels that there have been dueling studies done that both demonstrate need. She continued that there are 19 acres at Dondero School as an example of there being other options for fields other than this parcel. She asked that the committee resist the urgency being placed on the need for recreational fields.

John Stephenson – stated he supports the vision statement and feels this is a special and unique piece of land. He stated it is miraculous that it has survived this long and remained so pristine.

Roland Lalancette – has lived adjacent to the property for 50 years and has seen all of the activities through the years including its use as a dump. He stated there is already enough traffic and if they open the gate, they will have to build a parking lot and the woods will be destroyed. He concluded that the High School already took some of this property for fields.

Todd Henley – member of the Recreation Board, stated that people have commented on the fact that comparisons to Dover and Rochester are not logical, but he works for the Kittery Recreation Department with a much smaller population and they have 11 fields and are looking for more. He stated that the property is city-owned and a field would only take up a small portion, on the cap, and would not involve taking down any trees. He concluded that the disc golf course is a good idea and so are many of the other passive activities mentioned, but they also can be done at the Urban Forestry land.

Rick Bean – reviewed the various activities he is and has been involved in over the years including Portsmouth Little League, Mavericks, and St. Patrick's School and how the lack of fields for both games and practices have affected these programs. He continued that the is city-owned property and many people have spoken in favor of using this land for a field and feels that through compromise all purposes can be served.

Margot Doering – stated she has attended most of the meetings and understands the primary purpose is to recommend to the Council the best use of this particular property and agrees with the draft vision and guidelines proposed. She continued that the charge was not to look at the recreational needs of the city but to look at what is appropriate for the parcel. She stated she is sympathetic with the need for fields but there are other options which are outlined in the Recreational Needs study. Finally, she stated that regarding disc golf, Ms. Tanner has an idea for a better suited parcel for this activity.

Ian (last name inaudible) – stated he uses the property and Urban Forestry land with his children at least once a week and has only seen a couple of times where the parking lot was full so he doesn't want to see more parking added. He stated he doesn't want to see more activities added to the area as it disturbs wildlife habitat and plants. Finally, he stated there is effluent going into the creek and he would like that investigated.

Roger Pitroff – stated he lives diagonally from the gate on Jones Avenue and he feels that this is a land grab and asked if the State Wildlife Dept. has been involved at all. He stated that he and his neighbors don't understand why every piece of land needs to be developed and that this should just be left alone. He continued that dogs should not be allowed as the leash laws are not enforced. He asked if there have been any traffic studies done. He stated that nobody has reached out to the neighbors and doesn't feel that they should be the ones who have to do the research of what is going on. He concluded that property values go down when recreational and school activities are nearby.

Jackie Cali-Pitts – stated she used to live near the High School for many years and didn't even know about the property off Sagamore Avenue as she always thought it was fenced off and she obeys signs. She stated that she feels that this discussion is divided and not looking towards a compromise. She continued that the property should be accessible to all people and suggested a boardwalk type of installation similar to the Pease property.

Kathy Lynch – President of Portsmouth Little League, stated they have 3 dedicated fields for Little League but they are too small for other programs and feels it is unfortunate that kids lose interest in

playing because they have nowhere to play. She stated she understands the limitations of the cap site, but if not there then where.

Kevin (Last name not given) – stated he is new to Portsmouth and appreciates the vision and guidelines presented by the committee as he feels this property makes Portsmouth special and allows for activities not available anywhere else.

Chairman Spear called a brief recess at 9:00 p.m. and reconvened at 9:10 p.m.

5. Committee discussion and vote on vision and guidelines

Chairman Spear thanked everyone for speaking and stated that the Committee will first review the comments informally and then more formally adopt guidelines and recommendations.

Regarding Kent LePage's comments for recognition of Native Americans in a substantive way, consensus was to add this to the list of other needs, ideas and opportunities as more research and information needs to be gathered to ensure appropriate recognition.

In addition, and in relation to the recognition of Native Americans, connectivity of the parcel to the Urban Forestry land and Creek Farm was also added to the needs, ideas and opportunities list.

Discussion ensued regarding dogs on the parcel and the consensus was to add it to the Proposed Uses listing with the recommendation that dogs would be allowed as long as they were on a leash.

Athletic Fields –

Ms. Pyott stated that the committee is receptive to and supports the need for new fields, but the challenge of this property is access from the high school is about half mile to a mile and feels that with equipment etc. it would be challenging for some individuals. Also the cap itself is sloped and would have to be leveled and would be costly.

Councilor Dwyer agrees that a field would not work on this property but feels that turfing the current fields at the high school would triple or at least double the capacity. She continued that the comments that this was not the charge of the committee to find available land for fields but to determine if the usage was suitable to this property. She stated that this should be a part of the Capital Improvements Plan discussions and that adding turf extends the field life 20-25 years.

Ms. Mullaney stated that as the School Board representative she understands the need for more fields but also loves the passive recreation uses for adults and children. She continued that she is not qualified to say whether a field can or cannot be put there but feels that the terrain is slanted and it is a long walk from the high school. She stated that perhaps as part of the recommendation, the committee can ask the Council to look for land for 3-4 athletic fields as part of a long-range plan to support the athletic organizations.

Ms. Pyott asked if there was a way to partner with Pease for fields.

Mr. Moore explained that the 2010 Recreation Needs Study identified partnering opportunities with Pease and other communities as well as identified private and public parcels. He stated, in general, that any land on Pease or elsewhere that is ideal for field development is likely also advantageous for competing uses that typically win out. The Pease property reviewed in the Recreation Needs

Study posed many challenges for development that would yield limited recreation value overall.

Recreation Board member Sirmaian stated that after listening to the community members, coaches, volunteers etc. speak for the need for fields, we still have an obligation to investigate what the cost may be to logistically alter the land to accommodate fields as we have heard from the engineers that it can be done.

Mr. Moore stated that one of the things not articulated at the last meeting is the urgency of the need for fields but the scope of this Committee is limited to this parcel. He stated doing any cost analysis would be in a vacuum without taking into account other sites and reminded the members that the Engineers said that they can build anything for a price so it is a matter of what is possible versus what is feasible and, what in the end is the recreational value of the resulting asset after you account for the efforts to mitigate site constraints and minimize environmental impacts, etc.

Councilor Dwyer stated that maybe we can ask the Council to extend the scope of the committee to look at other undeveloped land for other uses and suggested that the Recreation community come out when the Capital Improvements Plan is being discussed.

Chairman Spear stated that most people agreed with the vision put forth and feels the committee should go forward with it as is. He continued that he understands the people who are speaking in favor of adding a field here because there is a need and the property is owned by the City. He stated there are other opportunities for a field and feels that even if cost wasn't the issue, he would wrestle with the compatibility of a field on this site. Next, in terms of expanding the scope of the committee, he would not want to dilute the focus without a detailed plan and stakeholder input. He stated that if we limit the search to public lands it excludes other options. As City Councilors he and Councilor Dwyer can direct the City Manager to solve the athletic field problem by the end of the year or could simply ask that a plan be devised to close the gap of needed fields by the end of the year.

Councilor Dwyer stated she would like to take this opportunity to at least add the recommendation of artificial turfing the existing fields.

Chairman Spear asked if there was a recommendation regarding the accessibility issue raised by Ms. Cali-Pitts. The consensus was to amend #10 and add "accommodate people with disabilities" to the statement.

Regarding Frisbie Golf, the issue was added as #11 of the Proposed Uses and Activity list as a "No" to Does it fit in with the Vision and recommend Parcels 24 and 26 off of Ocean Road as a possible location.

Ms. Pyott also asked that #5, Community Garden, be amended to add "and look at other possible locations in the City".

Community Development Director Moore stated he would like to address a couple of questions raised by Mr. Pitroff. First, regarding whether a traffic study had been conducted, he explained that the committee is forming a vision and guidelines at this point, but the uses have not been established. He stated as there are no specifics, a study cannot be conducted.

Next, regarding the questions of the State Wildlife sanctuary, there is no official designation as such or official status, and reiterated that the ½ of the parcel is to be used as recreational in perpetuity.

Chairman Spear asked for a vote of the Draft Vision Guidelines Cover Letter and Recommendations as amended.

Ms. Mullaney moved to approve the Draft Visions Guidelines Cover Letter and Recommendations as amended, seconded by Ms. Tanner. Motion passed on a 6-1 vote with Mr. Sirmaian voting opposed.

Chairman Spear stated that this will be presented to the City Council as an interim report in the next few weeks.

6. Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 10:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Valerie A. French
Recording Secretary