

MINUTES
MAYOR'S BLUE RIBBON COMMITTEE
ON THE
PRESCOTT PARK MASTER PLAN
7:30 A.M. – WEDNESDAY, JUNE 29, 2016
EILEEN DONDERO FOLEY COUNCIL CHAMBERS

1. Call to Order – Chair, Councilor Chris Dwyer

Chair Dwyer called the meeting to order at 7:30 a.m.

Members in Attendance: Councilor Chris Dwyer, Chair; Mayor Jack Blalock (until 8:55 a.m.); Councilor Nancy Pearson (until 8:40 a.m.); Phyllis Eldridge, Trustee of Trust Funds; Thomas Watson, Trustee of Trust Funds; Dana Levenson, Trustee of Trust Funds;

Member Absent: Stefany Shaheen, Citizen Representative

Staff Present: David Moore, Assistant City Manager

2. Consideration of Minutes from June 8, 2016

Mayor Blalock moved to accept the minutes from June 8, 2016, seconded by councilor Pearson.

Chair Dwyer requested 2 grammatical corrections.

Motion passed as amended.

3. Master Plan Process Update and Next Steps: Weston & Sampson

Chair Dwyer began by stating that the public input sessions have gone really well and appreciates the committee member participation and good weather. She stated that we have received many comments from the web page as well as the input received from the comment cards at the events.

Mr. Bolinger began the presentation stating that at this point he and his staff are like sponges and absorbing all of the comments and ideas from the various events and meetings. He stated that they have also been gathering data in the park area at various times and dates during different events and when there are no events taking place. He stated that he feels people are taking the process seriously and taking a part in the process. He continued that after the initial observations of buildings, docks, walkways, benches, trees, etc. it is apparent that much of the infrastructure is tired so the next step is to quantify physical conditions as to the sense of urgency in regards to unsafe conditions, ADA compliance, multi-generational access, etc. He stated that at this point we would start to develop the sense of cost ramifications associated to bring things back to good repair. He concluded stating they are looking to report back in 2 weeks.

Next, Ms. Ruane reiterated that there will be a the initial Site Analysis in 2 weeks and then they will come back with a final summary to get input on the design but also to decide how what has been discussed will shape what the park will be doing in the future. She stated that the programming and physical aspects must be answered hand in hand.

Chair Dwyer stated that with the site analysis we may find things that are priority fixes, but the design may remove that item anyway. Chair Dwyer asked if they have observed any surprises or something that calls for immediate attention.

Ms. Ruane stated that things have actually come back as expected for a 60 year old space and that there are things that require attention and updating, but because of the dedicated staff in place, they have been dealing with these without any major upgrades.

Mr. Bolinger stated that the buildings on the property are a huge presence and are underutilized.

Next, Mr. Bolinger and Ms. Ruane reviewed the Park site analysis via geographic sections.
<http://cityofportsmouth.com/agendas/2016/misc/06-29-16-PrescottParkMasterPlanBRCpresentation.pdf>

Area 1: Four Tree Island

Mayor Blalock stated he has been to the island many times and just recently attended a gathering at 4 Tree Island and found it to be a highly functioning space. He feels it should not be changed but improvements are needed. He stated he would like to see an additional observational area added in the area across from the commercial piers where there are often harbor seals. He concluded there are minor repairs needed to existing items and would like to see the entrance be more inviting.

Mr. Watson stated he would like to see the transition from the main park to 4 Tree Island be marked with a hand railing along the walkway and as it crosses the bridge, but to keep it simple.

Ms. Eldridge stated that there needs to be better signage to let people know that the Island is out there as she has found that many people are unaware.

Councilor Pearson stated that the accessibility issue is a concern and understands that we don't want to allow vehicles out there, but suggested adding seating closer to the entrance.

Ms. Ruane stated that to make it vehicular accessible would require major upgrades and would change the whole concept and suggested installing a resting point along the way.

Chair Dwyer stated people would like more waterway access, although it may not be possible, but suggested an access point closer to the main part of the island. She suggested that there could be a seasonal water taxi so maybe have a docking area or a space for one for the future.

Discussion ensued regarding the area between the commercial pier to the island and its value as a natural resource.

Area 2: Formal Entry/North Parking Lot/Public Forum/North and South Docks

Mr. Bolinger stated that this is the area that is ripe for reconsidering how the space is organized and good example of being "tired".

Ms. Eldridge stated that she was surprised that 40% of the area is non-grass and feels that grass would be a good addition including in the parking area.

Chair Dwyer stated that the Norway maples provide a deep shade that people like, but feels they are not in the right place.

Councilor Pearson stated that people don't tend to stay in that location and are usually only passing through and have to go over tree roots to get somewhere else.

Mr. Bolinger agreed stating that his observations were that people actually sprinted through that area to get to the waterfront area.

Chair Dwyer stated the brick pillars at the entrance are formidable and not welcoming and regarding the fountain location, it has been moved several times so it could again.

Mr. Watson stated that the north end of the park is a clean slate and agrees with removing the parking area except for handicap spots. He stated the northern pier is also a forgotten part of the park and would like to see a multi-generational approach including more play areas for children.

Ms. Eldridge stated that although Pierce Island is not a part of Prescott Park, there is a playground there so could be added to the informational signage.

Mayor Blalock discussed the public forum area stating that it could be anywhere in the park.

Ms. Eldridge stated there have never been chairs or a stage involved with the public forum area but they do allow an amplified speaker.

Mayor Blalock stated the northern pier was a popular spot during the Memorial Bridge reconstruction so more people are aware of it. He agreed that this is a clean slate and we can incorporate the things that people feel are missing.

Chair Dwyer stated that 2 things missing from the discussion that are controversial are dogs and bikes. She stated that dogs are not allowed and the Council recently sent the bike ordinance to the Parking and Transportation Safety Commission for review as bikes often pass through the park. She stated that we don't want dogs in the park but many people walk their dogs in downtown and end up at the Park.

Discussion ensued regarding different ways to allow some access to bicycles and dogs, including welcoming dogs to the entrance of the park through providing water, but making clear the policy to not permit them within the park.

Chair Dwyer stated that the entrance would be a good place to acknowledge the Prescott Sisters and the history of the park.

Area 3: Open Lawn A/PPAF Stage and Support Structures/Whale Lawn/Prescott and T Pier/Open Lawn B/Sheafe and Shaw Warehouse and Marine Railway Headhouse

Discussion ensued regarding the location of the stage and the pros and cons of relocating the stage in terms of wear and tear and overuse issues.

Ms. Eldridge stated that the Prescott Park Arts Festival was given permission three years ago to move the stage back and they took into consideration the overuse issue. She stated that it would be helpful to find other examples of this type of activity in a neighborhood setting and how they deal with the various issues associated.

Mr. Levenson stated that protecting the vistas and views in this part of the park is important so we don't want anything that is overly intrusive. Regarding Water Street, he feels it is similar to the parking and does it need to exist. Finally, he stated that the buildings could be anchors and assets of the park.

Mr. Watson discussed the area where the tables and chairs are stored during the winter and suggested that could be addressed so that it is not a barrier when the tables and chairs aren't being used. He stated that it is clear that people want the PPAF in Prescott Park but it is a question of how big, how often, etc.

Chair Dwyer discussed the open lawn areas and the back of the buildings which people feel are off limits but are part of the park.

Mayor Blalock stated he likes the open spaces in the park but feels we need to do better with the trailer area and the tables and chair storage.

Councilor Pearson addressed the issue of the "donation" for events and understands how people could feel they are not welcome or allowed to enter the park when an event is going on and feels that the "free" language needs to be clarified and this is the opportunity to do so.

Mr. Levenson stated that the Trustees get a lot of feedback on the PPAF and have worked diligently with them in trying to make a smaller footprint etc. He stated the Trustees don't feel that all of their events need to be held in the Park but have gotten some pushback from them.

Chair Dwyer stated that if there was more trellis with vegetation then the trailers wouldn't be seen. She continued that the some of the trees and plants have a 1950's feel and feels the landscaping could be rethought and updated.

(Councilor Pearson left the meeting at 8:40 a.m.)

Discussion ensued regarding the commercialization and "free" access etc. which will be discussed further during the governance review.

Mr. Levenson stated that regarding the comparison of Boston Commons and the Public Garden can we or should we do both.

Discussion ensued regarding the reconfiguration of the park to accommodate the various users within the set parameters.

(Mayor Blalock left the meeting at 8:55 a.m.)

Area 4: Open Lawn C/Gundalow Dock/Liberty Pole/Trial Gardens/Anchor Garden

Discussion ensued regarding the Trial Gardens and the history of people in the past being able to take seeds at the end of the growing season, but it is no longer used in that way.

Mr. Watson stated the Fairy House Tour does use this area for their event.

Area 5: Formal Garden

Ms. Ruane stated that this area is very labor intensive and needs to be fixed up and upgraded to accommodate ADA requirements and multi-generational users. She stated that the gardens could be more sustainable as well.

In follow-up to the comments from Committee members regarding potential memorial opportunities for the Prescott family, Mr. Moore indicated the formal garden was a memorial to Josie Prescott

(Ms. Ruane left at 9:05 a.m.)

Discussion ensued regarding the formal garden being the most photographed area of Portsmouth.

4. Public Comment

Beth Margeson – stated that now that the festival season has begun again, we can be more aware of the intensity of the usage. She continued that over the years the programming of events has increased and she has tried to find a comparable arts festival in New Hampshire but found none that have the length of the season that PPAF does. She then discussed a recent e-mail that was sent out by a PPAF member that implied that the Prescott Parks Arts Festival is not being represented through this process and raises questions of the integrity of the process.

Chair Dwyer clarified that we have received many public comment e-mails regarding the Arts Festival but this is not the focus of this committee.

Mark Brighton – stated he is glad to hear the comments about the northern section of the Park but he is deeply concerned that the tail is wagging the dog and we are trying to fit the Park to the needs of the PPAF. He stated the Trustees are not the Trustees of the Park, but of the Trust Funds and also feels that it is not the City Council that controls the Park, but the will of Josie Prescott. He stated the legal concept of “date of intent” applies and it should be following the 1928 definition of Parks and Recreation. He concluded that he is disturbed by Mayor Blalock’s comments that the PPAF is the economic engine as this was not the intent of Josie Prescott.

Paul Mannle – discussed access to the park stating that it should be open to all people all of the time but that is not the case during the PPAF. He stated the committee should emphasize to the consultants that there are no “sacred cows”, other than the formal gardens, and that consideration should be made that the PPAF may be better suited to another venue especially during large productions such as the football field that also has ample parking. He continued that the Public Forum doesn’t need to be where it is or it could be in the form of a stage or gazebo and doesn’t have to be paved. He concluded that this is a 10 acre parcel and the consultants should have carte blanche.

Beth Margeson – stated that the issue of commercialization has been in the press recently and discussed the history of the rules put in place by the Trustees which were meant to prevent what is going on currently.

Chair Dwyer stated the next meeting will be held July 13, 2016 at 7:30 a.m.

5. Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 9:25 a.m.