

THE MAYOR'S
BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION
ON PARKS & RECREATION

Minutes of the Meeting
of
January 22, 2007

PRESENT: Chairperson, Commissioner Rosalynn Bliss, Commissioner James J. Jendrasiak, Commissioner Elias Lumpkins, Sonny Atkinson, George Dressander, Mike DeVries, Sharon Evoy, Walter Gutowski, Lisa Locke, Patrick Miles, Sr., Robby Saldana, Mary Kay VanDriel, Don Williams, Mary Alice Williams, Gera Witte, and Cassie Younts

Connie Dimond (facilitator), Jay Steffen (Parks & Recreation Dept. Director), Greg Sundstrom (Chief Services Officer), Tom Zelinski (Parks Superintendent), John Judnich (Recreation Supervisor), and Kelly Criner (Parks & Recreation Administrative Secretary)

ABSENT: Tommy Allen, Bing Goei, Bradford Mathis, Terry McCarthy, Clay Powell, Brian Prevost, and Ayin Valdes

Mr. Sundstrom welcomed those present, recognized the refreshment contribution and provided reminders of facilities within the building and parking validation.

Mr. Sundstrom encouraged Blue Ribbon Commissioners to attend the City Commission Annual Strategic Planning Retreat on 1/23/07 at noon. A brief report prepared by the sub-committee, Mr. Gutowski, Ms. Witte, Mr. Saldana and Mr. DeVries, will be presented. Mr. Gutowski will provide an introduction describing the first three meetings; Mr. DeVries will provide an overview of the brainstorming process; Ms. Witte will provide information on one cost cutting and one revenue generating strategy; Mr. Saldana will summarize how the group will complete their work. Discussion will follow.

Minutes of 1/08/07 - The minutes were unanimously approved.

Commissioner Bliss entered the meeting.

Additional Meeting Discussion - Ms. Dimond related that she mistakenly thought there were two meetings scheduled in February when in fact only one more meeting is planned for 2/12/07. She asked about interest in holding one additional meeting in February. Mr. Sundstrom related that an additional meeting would not affect the schedule. Commissioner Bliss recommended an additional meeting on 2/19 to allow the group more time to work through the remaining homework assignments. There was general agreement on the 2/19 date for an additional meeting.

Additional Homework Assignments - Discussion took place regarding the remaining strategies to be assigned for further exploration.

Mr. Williams explained that his sub-committee only went so far into their subject to get some feedback from the committee as a whole before investing more time and energy.

He asked if additional homework assignments would involve delving deeper into the areas already reviewed.

Mr. Saldana feels some of the remaining subjects could be lumped together for one committee to review.

Mr. Sundstrom related that the City Manager and City Commissioners are not expecting a full set of recommendations in priority order and fully flushed out. The idea was for the group to present a set of ideas that may be viable; viable not necessarily meaning that everyone in the group supports the idea. If the City Commission accepts the ideas they can make further assignments to staff. The group members shouldn't feel responsible to delve further into the subject matter.

Ms. Dimond took a count of those interested in exploring the remaining strategies:

Cost Reduction Strategies

Collaboration - 8 **combined w/**
Regional Park Authority - 6

Volunteers

Saldana, Locke, Gutowski,
D. Williams, Steffen, Bliss

Extreme Park Makeover - done
Reduced/targeted programming - 2
Cut labor costs (benefits) - 3

Witte, Bliss, Judnich, Barnes
Saldana, M. Williams, Gutowski,
Bliss, Sundstrom

State take over of cemeteries - touched upon by subcommittee on sale/lease of land

Revenue Generating Strategies

Advertising - 5
Short-term rentals - 2

Witte, Jendrasiak, Judnich, Steffen

There was no interest expressed in further exploration of the remaining strategies but they should be included in the final report:

Cost Reduction Strategies

Corporate tax credit/abatement (for donated services/materials)
Volunteer Maintenance
Outsource services
Re-evaluate/reduce maintenance levels

Revenue Generating Strategies

Cell towers
Increase fees

Response to Information Requests - Commissioner Lumpkins recalled Mr. Williams's request for statistics on crime in relation to available parks/recreation.

Mr. Steffen explained that the Office of Children, Youth and Families received a grant and in conjunction with the GRPD and GVSU they will compile juvenile crime statistics data by neighborhood association areas. That report is expected to be complete in April.

Ms. Williams recommended a statement be included in the Blue Ribbon Commission report that further research is warranted or that the matter should be taken into consideration.

Commissioner Bliss suggested it be tied to “reduced and targeted programming”. Ms. Williams expressed concern that the meaning of “reduced and targeted programming” would be misinterpreted unless it is clarified in the report.

Report on Revenue Generating Strategies:

Dedicated Millage or Income Tax Increase - Mr. Miles presented the written report generated by the sub-committee, attached hereto as an official part of the record.

Discussion followed. Mr. Miles clarified that such an action would only partially restore programs. He also clarified the final statement regarding the reduction in crime as a result of a Parks and Recreation improvement plan; it was an assumption made by the group. Commissioner Lumpkins related that it is a strategy used by many police departments; if there are activities etc. for children they have an outlet for the energy that is constructive rather than destructive. Ms. Evoy added that there are studies that have proven this.

Additional discussion took place with regard to how rigorously a dedicated millage or income tax increase should be pursued; whether it is something that should be done first or only after exhausting other options. Commissioner Bliss related that the sub-committee didn't prioritize the option but rather the feasibility and whether it is an option that should be explored. The sub-committee did discuss making it a short term, 10-year request, and placing a percentage into an endowment to make it more sustainable. They also discussed the possibility of decreasing property taxes to offset an income tax increase. Ms. VanDriel expressed her hesitation suggesting all other options be explored first. Mr. Gutowski added that they did come to a consensus that an income tax would be the better way to go. Mr. Miles related that a millage wouldn't capture all the dollars; the DDA and other entities would take a cut. With an income tax increase the Parks & Recreation budget could be taken out of the General Fund and maintained as a percentage of the General Fund, similar to the police department. Staff did relate difficulties with that. Commissioner Bliss added that they also recognized that property taxes have an impact on those with fixed and/or low income, which is why they determined the income tax was likely more feasible.

Ms. Williams expressed her understanding that these positions and the background material will be presented to the City Commission. She suggested that as they compile the report they should have a sense as to whether the strategies are strongly recommended, have the support of the full committee, whether it is a divided house but with strong enough sentiment that it should be considered, etc. Commissioner Bliss suggested also including a list of pros and cons.

Mr. Williams recalled his participation with the Citizen Budget Advisors group and asked if the members of this Commission will be asked to sign the final report.

Commissioner Bliss suggested the report include Ms. Williams's suggestion of how the Commission feels about the individual strategies as a group. She also feels it would be important that the entire Commission sign off on the report as a product of the work that they did. Ms. Williams recalled Mr. Sundstrom's comment that additional work on each strategy will be necessary; she agreed.

Mr. Sundstrom corrected an error on the report. \$156,600 is the amount of millage (2nd to last line of the first page) that would be captured by other sources such as the DDA.

Corporate Sponsors - A prepared handout was not provided.

Mr. DeVries related that this sub-committee focused on two components and began overlapping strongly into 'foundation'. Prior to the 'foundation' discussion, they focused on teaming with corporations; letting corporations, businesses and others in the community know what issues are facing the Parks & Recreation Department and defining the issues so that there is a general understanding as well as an understanding of what a donation would accomplish. It came down to giving, whether annual, foundational or estate planning contributions. The discussion revolved around identifying needs and goals and then mechanisms to generate revenue. An example was offered as a box on the City income tax form. Mr. DeVries summarized that it boiled down to what are needs, what are goals, what are dollar amounts, what are annual items and what are endowment items. Mr. Gutowski added that they also discussed needs that might not be popular. Commissioner Bliss added that they discussed different sponsorship levels and how a structure could be established. The sub-committee reached a consensus that they were comfortable with corporate sponsors putting their name on a facility in the form of a plaque, etc., to recognize them.

Ms. VanDriel indicated that they also felt there should be some follow up conversation. She and Commissioner Bliss offered to have a conversation with Diana Sieger of the Grand Rapids Foundation to explore that further.

The sub-committee responded to questions relating that they did discuss naming opportunities such as adopting a tennis court. They also recognized a need to look down the road because the naming opportunities would be for the more popular aspects or goodwill recognition. They all agreed that there is a lot of opportunity but additional work will be necessary in identifying the opportunities, clarifying the need and establishing a structure to solicit sponsorship and follow through with the process or policy.

Formation of a Parks Foundation - Ms. Witte presented the written report generated by the sub-committee. In preparing this information 12 different Parks Foundations were researched and discussion took place with others in the community involved in establishing foundations. There are a number of activities that fit very naturally within the domain of a foundation, including corporate sponsorships. Ms. Witte concluded her presentation indicating that there are many good models to look at and the strategy seems to have merit.

Ms. Williams asked if the foundations researched were free-standing. She expressed confusion as to partnership with the Grand Rapids Foundation. If it is a separate entity it would clearly be viewed as competition.

Ms. Witte indicated it would be more cost effective to partner but there are identity issues. Those researched are either stand alone or look like a stand alone. A question for the Grand Rapids Foundation would be whether it could be a partnership but look like a stand alone? Ms. Witte did not engage in conversation with the Grand Rapids Foundation.

Report on Cost Reduction Strategies:

Partnerships - Ms. Younts presented the written report generated by the sub-committee.

Mr. Atkinson added that they also discussed "where do we go from here".

Ms. Dimond asked if they could provide any examples. Ms. Younts replied; an organization constructing a building in a park that is a community recreation facility where children could take classes, after school programming etc. but utilizing park property and perhaps razing an outdated building to provide a more functional building.

Mr. Williams clarified that the new building wouldn't result in any cost to the taxpayers, other than those wishing to contribute. The citizens would get the advantage of a building and services in the area not currently there; bringing something to the community to lessen the anxiety of a community/potentially decrease crime. The intent would be to provide quality for the community.

Mr. Steffen related another example Mr. Judnich brought to his attention. He related that the Department partners with local churches to provide activities and programs. There was previous discussion of how a partnership really needs to be a win/win for both organizations. In this example, the Parks & Recreation Department has a presence in the neighborhoods and the church benefits by getting people into the church and potentially recruiting members.

Mr. Sundstrom provided the example of the partnership with D.P. Fox. The partnership works because they have a vested interest and it benefits their business. The partnership with Second Story Properties involves care for Vet's Memorial Park. They are constructing condominiums near the library and those that reside there will look upon the park; they have an interest in having the park look nice. The key is trying to align corporations, partners and donors with the needs of the area. He feels there are many opportunities to do that.

Ms. Williams cautioned on unintended consequences. She provided the example of a separation of church and state. She also feels that beautifying Veteran's Park will have unintended consequences; perhaps citizens being chased away from Veteran's Park. There are always unintended consequences with the best of plans and that should be considered.

Commissioner Bliss expressed a desire to explore more partnerships with non-profits.

Ms. Evoy suggested exploring a partnership with the Kent Skills Center and their landscape program.

Commissioner Bliss agreed. She favors the idea of a tree farm and perhaps that could double as a learning experience.

Ms. Williams suggested combining the efforts of 'collaboration' and 'partnerships'.

Parade of Parks - Ms. Evoy presented the written report generated by the sub-committee. Ms. Evoy indicated some work would be involved but she doesn't feel it would be overwhelmingly difficult. It may be that the groups are encouraged to take ownership in a particular park.

Mr. Gutowski feels the ownership aspect is important.

Ms. VanDriel feels it's a great idea. There are a number of garden clubs and there are also condo owners that now miss the ability to garden. Commissioner Bliss suggested it may be something for the neighborhood associations to take the lead on; coordinating with the landscapers etc.

Extreme Park Makeover - Ms. Evoy presented the written report generated by the sub-committee. She explained that this would be more of an 'event'; addressing one or two parks per summer that are in need. This too would be an opportunity for taking ownership.

Property Conversion, Transfer, Sale or Lease - Mr. Dressander began the presentation relating that Mr. Sundstrom pulled together a team from the City that was very helpful. Mr. Dressander presented the report.

Mr. Dressander explained that underutilized property, not generating any income, may be worthy of the time and labor involved in this consideration.

Mr. Sundstrom responded to Mr. Miles with regard to how much all of the City owned property could generate; tens of millions of dollars or more but that would include valuable properties, to both citizens and in terms of development, such as Riverside Park and the golf course.

Mr. Williams suggested that leasing may be more palatable.

Mr. Dressander responded to Mr. Gutowski regarding cemeteries and excess attached property. Mr. DeLong mentioned that the City may contemplate the end of any further development of, or expansion of, existing cemeteries which could result in additional property being available. The sold or reserved plots must be maintained however.

Mr. Williams asked why the City has a golf course when there are so many in the area.

Commissioner Lumpkins related his experience with Glenhaven Manor, which was a very prosperous use of property. It is likely there would be a good deal of interest in the Indian Trails property for development. During Commissioner White's campaign he spoke of the excess property the GRPS has. As consideration is given to City property it may also be interesting to look at the opportunities presented by the GRPS properties. Commissioner Jendrasiak recalled that Commissioner White wasn't the only one developing that idea. The public schools could develop their own farm system, or housing, utilizing the land surrounding their facilities. Additional housing provides the potential for more students attending the schools.

Ms. Williams indicated that when speaking of excess property and green space she envisions different things. She also suggests that this subject is at least as controversial as taxation would be. Any reduction of existing green space should be considered in depth. If it was determined that the golf course is disposable, it may be a good thing to consider partnering with GRPS or another entity to replace a comparable amount of the acreage. It is short sighted to think about the one time generation of funds in exchange for irreplaceable green space.

Mr. Miles related that his major concern is that all of the funds generated by the funding or cost reduction ideas recommended by this Committee be dedicated specifically to the Parks and Recreation Department and not go into the General Fund with the potential of being designated elsewhere.

Mr. Gutowski asked if there are any known properties that are significantly underutilized.

Mr. Dressander replied that that is one of the follow up recommendations for staff; to develop a list of City owned properties. When many of the older plats were developed, four or five lots at the center were left for the development of a park. Some of those were never developed and staff could easily catalog those.

Recognition was given to the difference of considering the golf course vs. park land. The value of parks and green space for neighborhoods, families and children is invaluable.

Remove/Close Outdated Facilities - Mr. Saldana presented the written report generated by the sub-committee. Mr. Saldana also referred to a photo presentation depicting the condition of several facilities.

Mr. Zelinski responded to questions indicating that some of the value of closing or removing facilities relates to aesthetics with no real dollar value. He gave the example of buildings being plagued by graffiti artists, vandalism resulting in replacing a door at the cost of \$500 and damage to other buildings with higher costs. Savings could be put back into other areas such as programming, maintenance or improvements. Mr. Zelinski commented on the tennis courts. Where there is currently a bank of six courts it may not be necessary to replace that with six but perhaps three and still meet the needs of the community.

Native Landscaping/Green Buildings/Energy Savers - Ms. Locke presented the written report generated by the sub-committee. Ms. Locke related that WMEAC has

been very active in these areas. Something that is very important is as simple as being conscious about decisions being made and the larger impacts they have, specifically in the long term. Native landscaping is not only environmentally friendly but also has concrete benefits to health, the economy and the way the space is used. She added to the written presentation indicating that green corridors are important also; finding ways to connect green spaces.

Ms. Locke provided clarifications regarding LEED certification and how those concepts, incorporated into an original design, do not necessarily result in increased costs.

Meeting Conclusion: Ms. Dimond reminded the group that there are many strong opinions, controversial ideas, and no decisions have been made. Discussions are basically confidential until such time as the report is released. She complimented everyone that worked on the topics and provided reports. She asked whether they felt the process was productive.

Commissioner Bliss felt it went well.

Mr. Sundstrom asked that everyone who prepared a report submit it via email.

Mr. Williams distributed a copy of the 'sustainability' definitions provided by Mr. Sundstrom.

Ms. Younts asked if they should engage in additional research on the topics presented today. She offered the idea of giving kids a constructive artistic outlet such as murals to counter the graffiti.

Mr. Sundstrom replied that anything that was done will become part of the report. He assured them that it would not be dismissed if anyone wished to invest more energy.

Mr. Steffen encouraged anyone with additional ideas to submit them via email. The City is preparing to launch a new Web site and it may be possible to offer a space to allow input, opportunity for sponsorships and opportunity for partnerships.

Ms. VanDriel offered the idea of banning the sale of spray paint in the city; it has been done successfully elsewhere. Mr. Sundstrom related that it was considered but would result in higher prices for the product in surrounding communities.

ADJOURNED: 6:05 p.m.