



Parks and Recreation Commission Meeting Minutes

October 18, 2023
The Centre at University

Attendance: Matt Buie, Lauren Eldridge, Samuel Ellis, J.T. Ferstl, Cannon Fletcher, Linda Smith, Mike Bernardo, Ben France, Ron Bara, Summer Campbell

Absent: Director Andrea Lewis, Capi Peck

City Board of Director Liaison: Director Andrea Lewis, Director Capi Peck

LRPR Staff: Leland Couch, Angela Nelson, Shawanda Robinson, Justin Dorsey, J.P. Rogers, Briana Hatfield, City Attorney Beth Carpenter

Welcome, and Introductions: Chairman Buie called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone present. After roll call, he asked the commission to take a moment to have a moment of silence in honor of City Manager Bruce Moore.

Roll Call and Approval of Minutes: Katherine Stehle called the roll, and Chairman Buie reported that there was a full house in attendance. Chairman Buie then asked for the September 13th minutes to be approved. Commissioner Ferstl moved to approve the minutes and Commissioner France seconded. The motion passed, and the minutes were approved.

Citizen Communication: There was no Citizen Communication.

Chairman Buie then called for any staff reports.

Staff Reports: Director Couch asked Deputy Director Angela Nelson to begin staff reports with Resource Administration.

Administration

Deputy Director of Administration, Angela Nelson, informed the commission that they are addressing policies and procedures and that will be ongoing. Dealing with HR-related issues, there is always going to be some type of disciplinary issues that they have to address. They are also focusing on PTO and leave usage. We have a lot of employees with large numbers of PTO that we need to address so that people do not take off at the same time so that it doesn't disrupt the entire department. We know that also has to do with effective planning. We are also monitoring certificates and licenses. We roughly have 50 employees that require some type of

certification for their position and we just want to make sure everyone is fulfilling their obligation to remain current. The positions that we have filled are our Assistant Marathon Manager and Assistant Facility Manager at Tennis. Also, our Parks and Marketing Media Coordinator, which is also in process, not exactly finalized and our Aquatics Specialist. The other positions that we are interviewing for is our Supervisor I over operations, Park Maintenance Worker that is a Community Garden Liaison and Operations, A Downtown Landscape Coordinator, which became vacant because we had a promotion so now that position is vacant. A Park Construction worker, and we even have some part-time positions: a secretary who will be helping out in the Administration division a Trails Coordinator, and an Assistant Aquatic Specialist position which also became vacant due to a promotion. As always our goal is to continue productivity and be efficient. That is an ongoing task. We are continuing to replace equipment. Also, monitoring our budget, because this time is a crucial time of year when we are trying to pinch pennies and be as conservative as we can to make it to the end of the year. We are also focusing on our PIT balances. So far everyone is good, some are very low but the most important thing is that no one is in the red. For the most part, everything has 50% remaining. As a department, we are continuing to dock our inventory as usual, this will be a big factor in November but this year we will definitely be ahead. Last but not least we had a chance to attend the NRPA conference, that was October 9th through the 12th. I always say if you're not learning you're not growing. We had the opportunity to attend a lot of workshops last week and we all were able to bring back a lot of new ideas, knowledge, and were able to visit some good vendors with some good products. It was a good place to meet a lot of people from different cities. Director Couch will probably speak on that later.

This concludes Deputy Director Nelson's report.

Chairman Buie thanked Deputy Director Nelson for her report and then called for questions.

Commissioner Smith asked how many open positions are there?

Deputy Director Nelson responded that she guesses there are about 20 because each time someone vacates and we promote that person that still leaves another vacancy that we have to deal with. They have 20 out of 130 positions. Director Couch stated that they have 130 full-time positions and that ramps up during different seasons. He asserted that Deputy Director Nelson was not guessing, she is saying that because when you hire somebody new it's a process. They have been able to fill the roles for upper management and now it is flip-flopped and they are losing a lot on the lower end in terms of maintenance or other jobs like that.

Chairman Buie called for any other questions, and there were none, Chairman Buie then asked if Director Couch would speak about the conference later, and Director Couch responded that he could. Chairman Buie asked if there was any particular takeaway and Director Couch first explained what the NRPA Conference was, and that they took 7 people to Dallas and they drove instead of flew, and were able to save more money. He mentioned that they go for continuing education, because most of them are certified in some way or another and due to that they have to accrue educational hours. The most exciting part for Director Couch was the exhibit hall. It was in a major conference center and they got to see the new and latest products.

As Director Couch gave Deputy Director Craig the floor he reminded the commission if there was a certain area, community center or location that they wanted to know more about to not hesitate to ask.

Recreation

Recreation Programs Deputy Director Shawanda Craig greeted the floor by mentioning that she was happy that they were able to get some of their top positions filled. She is excited that they have their Outdoor Recreation Coordinator that she mentioned last month. Regarding the conference she remarked that it was also an opportunity to network with other cities and people around the country. It gave us confirmation as far as the challenges we're facing, that it's not just Little Rock, its going on across the nation. As we spoke about previously, the shortage of lifeguards is a situation nationwide. We were able to connect with other people who were able to give us ideas on how to bridge that gap between the lifeguards we need and the ones that we have.

As far as sports recreation, the basketball program will be starting December 4th through the 15th, with a pause for Christmas break. It will start back up January 8th through February, depending on the make-up games and playoffs.

Next Thursday the 26th "Lights On" Afterschool program will be starting at Southwest, Dunbar, and Stephens Community Centers. This is an event we do every year. Each community center supervisor puts their own unique spin on this particular program. They have activities: the kids may color, write, and do some things that are familiar to after-school programs. They can make bracelets and do all kinds of unique things. So next Thursday, after 6 pm most of these locations will be starting this program.

At West Central Community Center the karate program has increased to 20 participants this past month. It is continuing to grow since it reopened. We are starting to get people to come back into West Central Community Center. Also, the dance program has increased by 15 participants, and they focus on ballet. At our East Little Rock Community Center the youth bike program called "Trail Blazers" ended on the 4th. It was the opportunity to train children on how to ride a bike. There was one participant in particular, he was 8 years old and was the smallest kid of the group. He had never rode a bike before. As a result of this program they took time to teach him how to ride a bike. Now his mother is going to purchase a bike similar to the one they had for the program so that he can continue his journey of riding bikes. Deputy Director Craig felt that was a plus of that program.

Coming up we have the annual trunk or treat event at Southwest, Dunbar, and Stephens. We have a safe environment for kids to come and trick or treat on Halloween. If you would like to donate some candy to our community centers for the event the kids would definitely appreciate that.

We are also doing some renovations and improvements to the roads at Interstate Park, but she will let Deputy Director Justin Dorsey talk more about that. She has not gone over yet to see what they are doing with the construction.

That concludes Deputy Director Craig's report. Chairman Buie called for questions. There were none.

Before Director Couch handed the floor over to Operations Deputy Director Justin Dorsey, he asked that he cover the swimming pool at Jim Dailey and the projects.

Operations

Deputy Director Dorsey started his reports by talking about the conference from his point of view and how beneficial it was for him to attend. It was his first year meeting the different vendors and he made a lot of good contacts that he is still sorting through and will be reaching out about all the new products and different things out there that they can incorporate and possibly bring back for other parks departments that can lower maintenance needs, improve sustainability, time savings, utility savings and the like.

Going through the highlights we have finished some really big projects at Butler Park, getting some trees out of there, and the contractors are finishing that up. Maintenance has a new crew. With mowing season, they're moving into using the parking lot sweeper that they purchased in the spring for getting limb debris and parking lot debris cleaned up in advance of the winter. Some of the bigger projects have some updates that he is excited to report about. The Murray Pavilions: 1-7 are complete but number 8 as of yesterday has begun. We were at Murray on yesterday and they were on-site working on it and replacing the roof. We should have it open and rentable again in the next two (2) weeks. Then all the pavilions at Murray will be completed.

There is a correction on Jim Dailey, and Deputy Director Dorsey wanted to give an update. We originally thought the bids would close November 1st, but they actually close on the 26th of October. It opened October 5th, and we met there and had a mandatory walkthrough on yesterday. We had a good turnout. There were several interested parties that participated in the walkthrough. They have to have the bids in by 1 pm on the 26th. After that, we will review those and ask some questions. If there are still some questions or concerns after that, there is a possibility that we may have to issue an extension. The most important thing is that we get a successful bid versus having to restart the process. Hopefully we get a successful bid on the 26th and can then move into the contract phase.

We met this morning at Western Hills. There is a crew on site that began great site work on building the restrooms. We expect them to come in December, so they are doing great prep and dirt work.

As far as the archery range we are putting a plan together and trying to form a team to identify key players as to who all would be involved in the design process of updating the archery range. Deputy Director Dorsey incorporated members from Game & Fish, 4H, and scouts so if anybody has any interest or sports or knowledge that would like to come to the table on that, he would be welcome to discuss that as well, helping to get a vision for moving forward.

Interstate roadways, they have finished the entire west side of that project, it is complete, sodded and done. They have taken off all the barricades and moved to the east side and are in the process of that, and it looks like 3 weeks maybe 4 before that entire process is complete, and that's a conservative timeline.

Crump basketball goals, if you haven't been out there lately it has brand new basketball goals. In addition, we have ordered new bleachers and concrete pads to go with the basketball courts. That should be done shortly.

That concluded Deputy Director Dorsey's report, and he then opened the floor for questions. Chairman Buie called for questions, and Commissioner Smith asked where the new archery range would be located. Deputy Director Dorsey responded that it would be at Rebsamen. She then asked about Kanis and access for pickleball. Deputy Director Dorsey responded that the bridge was complete and explained that they are in the process of divvying out seating under the bridge for basketball. We will have to fix it and re-pour that. Everything else is almost complete.

Chairman Buie then called for any more questions and there were none.

With no further questions and no other staff reports, Chairman Buie shifted the agenda to old business.

-

Old Business

Chairman Buie opened the old business by asking if there were any updates or new information from Commissioner Eldridge about any golf tournament updates. She shared the approximate take-in between the sponsors who provided a sign or registered for a team. All the teams that registered as well as the extra cash add-ons that you could do onsite. We took in approximately between \$9-10,000, so hopefully that made a difference for the programs over the summer. She knows that there will be changes coming next year because of the director at Rebsamen. She believes it will open up some creativity for next year's event. As far as the golf tournament event is concerned, it was a success, it was a beautiful day and she believes that everyone who came had a great experience. Chairman Buie called for questions for Commissioner Eldridge. There were none.

Chairman Buie then called for the subcommittee report from Master Plan. There was none.

Chairman Buie then called for the subcommittee report from Social Media Outreach. There was none.

Chairman Buie then called for the subcommittee report from Parks Conservancy. He mentioned that they are still raising money and looking for members. Commissioner Eldridge mentioned that there was a Friends event recently at Trails Restaurant. There were over 40 people in attendance and they had a few new donors because of that. It was a great turnout. There is another event coming soon: Parks Conservancy will be hosting a Harvest Fest. He mentioned that most if not all Commissioners have joined.

Chairman Buie then called for any updates on the Sales Tax from Director Couch. He mentioned that there was a request to get feedback from the executive administration but as of yet they have none. He knows that they were working on getting it, because there have been some major changes and that he should be able to get an update next month. Chairman Buie thanked him.

Chairman Buie then began addressing New Business.

New Business

He began by bringing up Recreational Resources for the elderly and disabled in Parks. Talking about the accessibility parks. He then gave the floor to Director Couch for more information.

Director Couch mentioned that this was requested from Design Department, Ron Ross. He began by saying this is going to be a brief overview due to the time left. Ron and someone else in the department would be able to go into more detail about location or more information and we can set up an offline meeting about it. He then went into what kind of programming and system we have and how we address ADA for our department. Currently, for programming, they have a one-off Therapeutic Recreation facility and satellite fields for Therapeutic Recreation at Ottenheimer Center which is in southwest Little Rock. He declared it a one-off because he doesn't know of another similar public facility that offers recreation for these type of individuals. Its great that we continue to have that in our department. For example, that could be its own whole presentation in itself of what their programming is and everything else.

Another one that's really big for us is seniors. We have senior programming at our community centers. Some of the community centers have their own rooms and facilities and they utilize the community centers and banquet halls, and our staff clear out the gym, and spaces and set up programming for them. So that's a really great venue for seniors and ADA-challenged individuals that need facilities like that for accessibility.

The other is one of our new things: Our Outdoor Recreation Programmer will be working with our Therapeutic staff and other staff to do programming, and looking at ADA programming as well.

Moving onto facilities. In general all of our facilities, Community centers, tennis and golf, Jim Dailey, our parks, are all in a position to prove their ADA accessibility. In general, our standards are that they are all accessible. Some of them are different. Some of them are different and I can give you an example: tennis courts at Meriweather Park are built on top of a hillside, for us to get accessibility there is more challenging, so we go to other parks that also have tennis courts and made those accessible. So we're providing accessible amenities to the public in different locations and are always striving to make them all accessible. The tennis center behind here is accessible, Jim Dailey's parking lot area is now accessible. We are up and coming on our community centers with new funding so we're studying what we need to do to transition those, even this facility itself is under design to go to a Seniors facility. So that's another big programming for elderly and ADA, is this facility. Design just actually included a pool for Therapeutic Recreation, so that will be a whole other great amenity for our department.

Director Couch was excited to say that they just finished their park-inclusive playground at MacArthur Park. It was almost a \$1 million playground project full of accessibility for all individuals. We have fishing at Murray and the trails over there provide multiple access points so that it's accessible for the elderly. There are also some river trails as well, not to mention pavilions, basketball and sculptures. I can go down a list of what we have.

On top of that we have tons of other projects ongoing. Our Deputy Director of Operations mentioned a few of those. Our Kanis project will be fully accessible with its basketball courts and all of that. Director Couch wanted to mention that they are following all federal guidelines

and he has his own standards in terms of playgrounds for example. Playgrounds could have loose surfacing, and we have loose accessible surfacing, and it is a standard now that all playgrounds will have a step up with maintenance and accessibility. We make our own step-ups where we can and do what we think is best to do.

That concluded Director Couch's report on accessibility in the parks, and he opened the floor for questions. Commissioner Bara mentioned that NRPA.org has grant funding resources specifically for supporting healthy aging through parks and recreation. There is also sport funding through the US Soccer foundation mentioned on the site as well. Director Couch thanked Commissioner Bara and mentioned that they do have a grant office that helps with some of their grants, but they do apply for as many grants as they can. They apply for a lot of trail grants. He is not familiar with the exact one but they recently did a fit lot down at Murray, and at the conference they were discussing the thought of doing another fit lot. They are always appreciative of new grant opportunities and thanked Commissioner Bara again for bringing that to their attention.

Chairman Buie asked for more questions and Commissioner Bara asked if the grant office for the whole city or for parks? Director Couch responded that there's a grant office in city hall which is made up of different people but they are there to approve the request for grant. So if Director Couch were to apply for a grant he would fill out a request from their office to the grant office asking them to help with the process and approval of applying for that grant. They work together and they take the majority of the writing responsibility. The department has to go through the grant office because they request funding matches for these grants. They can't apply for anything until the department has those funds.

Chairman Buie once again called for questions or comments. Commissioner Bernardo asked whether security in the parks would be an ongoing update at the meetings. He asked Director Couch if there had been any progress in that area. He asked if security could be an ongoing discussion.

Director Couch mentioned that they can definitely add a security discussion to the agenda and will get a report out in future meetings. He said that as a whole the City, each department is responsible for providing data in a specific area so that they can check progress. The parks department selected security to be their data set, so now they are looking at data at all of the parks and plan to reduce crime by 10%. The biggest way with the data is to utilize police reports. So please always make a report. License plate readers are about \$3200, and we are asking for a budget for that, but in the meantime, we are looking at different ways to increase security. In terms of Kanis Park, in particular, he agrees that a license plate reader would be a good idea. We always could do something with security. We have security at Rebsamen tennis here and at other facilities where we have peaks. Those are a few things, but if that discussion is wanted as an agenda item he is good with that.

Commissioner Bernardo mentioned that he would like to request that, and mentioned that for example Kanis Park where people park is not too far, but they are smashing windows in broad daylight, with thirty (30) people on the courts. They are not afraid of getting caught, they are just brazen. He is concerned that eventually, people are going to get hurt and that there will be a confrontation because people are getting frustrated.

Director Couch agreed with Commissioner Bernardo and clarified that it was not just Kanis Park, its River Mountain, Rebsamen Tennis, and Rebsamen Golf. They have hundreds of parking lots and its happening at all of them. It's something that is a much bigger topic than Little Rock parks, and as soon as these people get arrested I hear what happens to them is the bigger question. In terms of how we deter all that absolutely, it's all those different solutions that we've talked about, so we will go from there. He understands that's not helpful but he is open to suggestions.

Commissioner Eldridge asked if it would be helpful to have a Little Rock Police Department representative come to one of our meetings and talk about what happens in Parks they seem to identify that have a risk. Director Couch said that if the commission wanted to request that he would contact the LRPD.

Commissioner Ferstl said that he could tell the Commission what LRPD would say. That they don't have enough officers and they don't have anyone that wants to become an officer. Chairman Buie then said that this is what Director Couch meant by it being a bigger issue than what the Commission can solve at this moment.

Moving on to upcoming events he gave the floor to Mike Garrity. Garrity mentioned that there are a few things coming up. This Saturday is the Creep and Crawl with a 5k a half-marathon and a little kid's race. So far there are 700 people signed up, plus another 87 that are running virtually. It's at Two Rivers Park and they run all along the river trail. That's on the 21st in the afternoon and evening.

Chairman Buie asked how it was possible to run virtually.

Mike Garrity responded that you pay a little less, and they send you a shirt a medal, and you can go run wherever. They also had a series that you can do virtually.

On October 27, Southwest Community center has a children's art show. On the 31st the community centers all have events and then going back to Marathon November 7th and 8th. They are having a free class on evacuation of sporting and special events. It's a two (2) day class.

On December 16, they have their Ugly Sweater Race, which is a 5k, and a Little Elf Dash.

That concludes his report. Chairman Buie called for questions, and there were none.

Chairman Buie moved onto the next item which was Agenda items for the next meeting. He then asked Commissioner Bernardo if he wanted to add an Agenda item. He made a motion to add a high level security report as an ongoing Agenda item. It was seconded by Commissioner Ferstl. It passed.

There was no Board Liaison feedback.

Commissioner Fletcher mentioned that for a while they were having a park or a group of parks highlighted at each meeting and he wanted to bring that back. Focusing on the updates and the programming.

Commissioner Smith mentioned that another park she would like to hear more about is Reservoir, and the future plans for it.

Director Couch mentioned that they just recently received some of their insurance Reservoir and Murray Park. Rock Creek Park is completely separate and they're finalizing an agreement with NRCS. He knows that people have been saying that's been ongoing for a long time. It's a federal agreement roughly worth \$1 million and that will allow us to clear and clean up all of the downed trees in Rock Creek and allow them to continue their efforts there. Staff is doing a great job working with our homeless challenges there because it is a big challenge. In Reservoir Park the items there are finalizing everything that's going to be demolished and what's going to stay standing. He mentioned that Deputy Director Dorsey could correct him but he believes everything there is listed to be demolished minus the pavilion based on value depending on is it more affordable to put in a new pavilion or fix the one that's there because it's been damaged so much. But everything there has to be torn down and rebuilt which is a huge challenge. So we did get some insurance and now we're going through the process with FEMA, who we have been working with on a weekly basis, and are working with them to figure out the other aspects of that. Additionally, we have been working with Andover Court which is the adjacent property that had some trees from Reservoir Park that were falling in there and there's a fence line there. Staff has cleared all the trees off the fence line and are repairing the fence line. The Parks department is working with Cromwell. They have been working to see what the next phase is. They've gone through a couple of rounds of erosion and now they're looking at creating a new Master Plan for the park. There's one aspect where they could build the pavilion back where it was and restrooms, but FEMA wants us to look at whether that is the best location going forward. The whole disc golf course was destroyed, is that something they want to put back now that the canopy is destroyed? So there are a lot of big questions, and while they don't have all the answers but they are definitely moving forward. It will be closed for a long time however. Murray is essentially fully operational except for Pavilion #8. He is hopeful that Rock Creek will start progressing forward next month.

Commissioner Smith mentioned that Central Arkansas Water, as a neighbor to Reservoir sustained a lot of damage as well, and their fence line around Reservoir is about to be replaced. There was so much damage that most people haven't turned in the drive to see because all the equipment coming in makes it barely able to drive down. She thinks there's a lot of work and she applauds Cromwell for bringing their great design skills to what the vision could be for Reservoir Park.

Director Couch agreed and mentioned that they have been working with Central Arkansas Water from day 1 and they've been out there and looked at the historical aspect of the park and been discussing if there is anything that they need to do differently. They've looked at the fence line, at controlled burning, and they've worked together on the removal of the trash and debris. There's a big question about what they're going to do with all the trash and they sent contractors today to go and pick up trash. Director Couch asked that people refrain from dumping at the park. He knows it was once a dumping ground at one point but it's not anymore. That ended the day they officially hired a contractor to pick up all the debris. They're really trying to turn it and start building back, but it's just a lot of effort to do that. It will be great see the fence going back up from an aesthetic view.

Commissioner Smith added that it is also for protection because there is no fishing or swimming allowed and they've had some violations. They try to keep people out but it's hard.

Chairman Buie thanked Director Couch for that update.

Director Couch then asked Commissioner Eldridge if she still wanted an LRPD rep to come to the meeting next month. She clarified that she could help arrange it if need be if it would be helpful.

Chairman Buie put it to a vote whether anyone would want a police rep at the next meeting. There was a motion to pass it by Commissioner France, and it was seconded by Commissioner Ellis. The motion passed.

Chairman Buie then mentioned that report, like the one Commissioner Bernardo requested, would be a short report which would not take up the entirety of the meeting.

Commissioner Fletcher mentioned that they live a block away from Reservoir and it has indeed become a dumping ground for lots of things, and anytime he goes there he sees more and more sketchy behavior. He asked if it would be possible to lock both ends of it at night or if it would even be feasible.

Director Couch mentioned that they have gone through many different scenarios regarding controlled access. The biggest challenge is that they still have a lot of different contractors running back and forth, so they considered closing off the entire street, but they would have to work with CAW and several other people, so they just haven't finished that yet. They are pushing having another contractor go in and grab the trash but he thinks there will be some type of measure to slow or prevent that soon. He mentioned that since one area is so open, putting up a gate will just make people drive around it, so at this point in time, they are still looking at options.

This concludes the Wednesday, October 18, 2023, Park Commission Meeting. The next meeting will be Wednesday, November 8, 2023, at the Willie Hinton Resource Center at noon.

Buie encouraged all who could attend the following events in person. Chairman Buie thanked everyone for their reports.

Meeting Adjourned.