

Park and Recreation Commission

Minutes

(meeting taped)

Monthly meeting: Monday, October 14, 2008 in the City Hall.

Meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m.

By roll call, members present: John Walsh, James Benanto, Red Clynych, Beverly Moran and Andrew Cota. David Mikos and Nick Serednitsky were excused.

Parks and Recreation Director Dennis O'Connell and Athletic Director Joseph Orazetti were present.

ADDITIONS OR DELETIONS TO THE AGENDA:

Without objection, the agenda was accepted, as written.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

A motion was made by William Clynych and second by James Benanto. Move to accept the minutes of September 8, 2008, as written. Motion carried unanimously.

PUBLIC PORTION:

Art Gerckens of 374 Hawthorne Avenue spoke on the Derby Youth Soccer program's use of fields for their fall season. He understood that a good-faith agreement was reached prior to the start of the season between Youth Soccer and the Parks and Recreation Department that practice would be held at Bradley School but games would be played at Witek Park. He was concerned that this agreement had been broken. He explained that when his concerns first surfaced that the Parks and Recreation Commission had already met in September and as such, he approached the Board of Alderman, doing so in an effort to try and save the soccer season. He was present this evening to try to resolve this matter. It was his understanding that the President of Youth Soccer was informed three days prior to the start of the season that all practice and games would be held at Bradley School and when he asked if he had a choice, he was told "no". For the record, he understood that there was an offer to split some of the games and divisions so a portion of the games could be held at Witek but this offer was refused as there are parents with children in multiple divisions and dividing between two locations would be difficult. Derby Youth Soccer felt it was an all or nothing deal. He expressed his concerns during the public portion of the Board of Alderman, contacted Senators Crisco and Gentile, and raised his concerns at the meeting of the Youth Soccer Board of Directors. He does have an action plan depending on the outcome of this discussion, that being to update the Board of Alderman, to send editorials to the local newspapers and because of his interest he has been offered a seat on the Youth Soccer Board of Directors. The New Haven Register has expressed interest in a story as to why the City built soccer fields and then refuses to allow the children to play there. He did not desire to move on his action plan but his next steps are dependent on tonight's outcome.

Mr. Gerckens stated that the City Charter specifically states that priority be given to youth programs. Yet, Mr. O'Connell stated at the September Board of Alderman meeting that Parks and Recreation gives the fields to the schools first. That seems to be a direct contradiction of the Charter. The schools do not own any fields, the Board of Education does not own any fields, and the Athletic Director does not own any fields. He questioned how the Athletic Director can request five games at Witek Park and then play twenty-two. He suggested that if there is overuse, it is the result of the Athletic Department's actions. Youth Soccer has been told that the fields are overused and he felt that was a ridiculous claim because one of the statements made is that an actual turf field can accommodate twenty-five games a year but this

is in regards to adult use, not five and ten year olds that have little impact on the condition of the field. Another complaint has been the multiple lines on a field. The High School soccer teams have played for years on DeFilippo Field along with the football teams and they have adapted to the many markings. If it is confusing, paint the lines different colors for each of the sports. He noted that Parks and Recreation Commission's September minutes states that the men's soccer league plays on Sundays, is this why youth soccer can not play? Mr. Gerckens asked why is Mr. Hughes responsible for the oversight of the fields; it seems that he is overstepping his bounds, he is only one vote. He noted that in the August 31st minutes of the Board of Alderman, the Mayor states that the Parks and Recreation Department is dysfunctional. Certainly it is confusing when it is unclear who has authority. The Parks and Recreation Commission have been saying for many years that they do not have authority over Witek Park. An Evaluation Committee was chaired by Mr. Walsh a few years ago and there has been no action on their findings. He questioned what the Board of Alderman were doing with the recommendations and why was the Parks and Recreation Commission not pursuing the matter. Finally, Mr. Gerckens questioned, what is the real reason two hundred children are being kicked out of Witek Park and how do we insure that this does not happen again.

Daniel R. Waleski of 23 Elm Street, Derby, CT. stated that he recently walked the Greenway and noticed the distances posted on the signs, he asked if the opposite side of the signs could reflect the reverse measurement of the distance. Chairman Walsh replied that the Committee that oversaw the Greenway construction did discuss that idea and for safety reasons, it was felt that the signs could provide a location marker should there be an emergency. If distance references were dependent on the direction of travel, this could cause confusion to the responding emergency personnel. Mr. Waleski felt that the expressed confusion could be overcome and the distances both ways would be helpful.

Mr. Waleski stated that Mr. Gerckens comments were very meaningful but he did not feel that Mr. Gerckens realizes the sensitivity of the location. Some feel that there is more than enough activity now. Due to the topography of the land, there are possible environmental concerns that run-off from the fields could contaminate the adjoining reservoirs. Some citizens do not feel that Witek Park is the place for adult soccer; its use is for the youth. Certainly, the city is somewhat handicapped with the limited number of fields but youth are offered a lot of recreation. Many would like to see the Derby Veteran's Community Center pool used more with one suggestion being that the High School develops a swim team. He suggested that the soccer fans could be more considerate and not quite so aggressive and he felt what they are trying to achieve can be worked out over the long run.

Chairman Walsh indicated that Mr. Gerckens may not have the whole picture. He would have liked to see the Youth Soccer Directors present this evening. Mr. Walsh stated that it has been said by the Commission that the Parks and Recreation Department is dysfunction for many reasons. One being that with the exception of staff at the Derby Veteran's Community Center, there is only one part time person, the director, Dennis O'Connell. Mr. O'Connell is dependent on the Public Works to oversee the fields and he coordinates with the many programs directors. It must be said though that the Parks and Recreation Commission was very effective in pushing for getting the fields. Yes, the Board of Education does not have any fields, but for many years the Recreation Department had no gymnasiums.

A study was done a decade ago with funds obtained from the City and the Board of Education. Members from the Board of Alderman, Board of Education and Parks and Recreation Commission comprised this committee and they studied all the existing facilities and programs and a long-range plan was developed. The plan was presented to the voters in referendums but the funding requests were voted down twice. Witek Park was a part of the plan that was accomplished and he noted that the fields are designated as multi-purpose so as to support the prevailing popular sport. The fields were controversial and stipulations were placed on the fields to oversee the protection of the environment. Alderman Hughes has been very instrumental in getting the fields completed properly as there were many issues with the construction prior to him taking office. The maintenance schedule is something that would benefit all the

fields in town. The stipulations required that a Turf Management program be instituted with a certified person overseeing the proper installation and maintenance. Mr. Hughes offers his expertise at no charge.

Chairman Walsh stated that recreation is for everyone and we should provide facilities for all ages, not only for the youth. The reality is we can not do that at this time due to the limited space. Unfortunately, every time we add a program, we do not add a facility. The Commission was well aware at the time that adding soccer to DeFilippo Field meant the end of grass on that field. The level of use was far greater than what the field could support but there was no other facility for the program at that time so to be equitable and fair to the both the programs, the use was permitted.

The Review Committee recommendations were presented to the Board of Alderman with no action taken. They were discussed at the Board of Alderman Sub-Committee chaired by Alderman Anthony Szewczyk in later months but they have not returned to the Board of Alderman. The Parks and Recreation Commission continues to pursue facilities and improvements to the existing facilities.

The Parks and Recreation Commission has been communicating with the Board of Education Athletic Committee and the new superintendent. The Commission sought to have fields included in the new Middle School project. It appears there may be a potential field planned and the Commission is exploring this possibility with the Building Committee.

Bradley School fields were not used last year and in an effort to relieve some of the use on DeFilippo Field their use was brought back into the schedule. Chairman Walsh, Mr. O'Connell and Alderman Hughes did meet with some of the Youth Soccer directors, it was not a meeting with the Commission but rather a discussion, but no agreement was reached. The directors indicated that they would go back and discuss the matter further with all the directors. Nothing further was heard from Youth Soccer until the issue was raised by Mr. Gerckens. Mr. O'Connell did respond to the concerns by suggesting that some of the programs could go to Witek, but not all of them. The next thing that occurred was at the Board of Alderman meeting and at that meeting Chairman Walsh stated that there was still the opportunity to move some of the activity to Witek.

Witek Park is for everyone in town. This Commission has always given the school system first choice. This is a new facility so it's a little different but the Commission has always tried to treat Youth Soccer fairly. They have full use of the facility in the spring and in the fall some of the high school programs use the facility, not all of the high school programs. Soccer programs are still practicing on softball fields. The compromise in the fall is to give them some use of the facility. Youth Soccer could have had some use also but they chose not to. The Commission does not have the ability to solve all the problems but they are trying to do the best they can within the limits. Surprisingly, Parks and Recreation received a complaint this year that the grass at Witek was too high, something that has not been expressed about any of the fields in many years. This is a testament to the maintenance and oversight and it demonstrates the needs of the other facilities. Certainly, things will not improve until additional fields are made available. The Commission believes artificial turf at DeFilippo would greatly enhance the situation and Chairman Walsh noted the ongoing need for an artificial track at the facility as the track team has not had a home meet in more than fifteen years due to the absence of a qualified facility. Certainly the City is doing better for soccer than ten years ago when they had no facility. Currently, the most serious of concerns is Uleski Field. The surface is devoid of any meaningful turf.

Chairman Walsh took exception to the comments in the letter from Mr. Gerckens that stated that the Commission lied. Certainly, this is not the case. The City has been very generous to recreation. Soccer has better facilities than football with the addition of Witek Park. The Greenway is a tremendous enhancement to recreation. Until the tax base is stabilized and the city is receiving more revenue, funds are limited but recreation continues to serve the City in the most favorable manner.

Mr. O'Connell applauded Mr. Gerckens' passion for soccer. It seems that some of the things that Mr. Gerckens had heard did not concur with his recollections. The meeting involved six people and was held in the back room at the Derby Veteran's Community Center. During that meeting, Mr. O'Connell stressed the need to balance the activities on the facilities by the programs. The motivation was to bring some of the High School soccer program over to Witek Park so as to better regulate the usage at DeFilippo Field being that over the past five years the field has deteriorated greatly due to the extensive use. To provide that relief, Bradley School fields were added to the schedule. Mr. O'Connell noted that there are no men's programs at Witek Park in the fall; they are playing at Bradley on Sunday mornings. In the spring, they do play at Witek Park. With the limited number of facilities, Bradley School fields can not be abandoned, they need to be used.

Mr. O'Connell indicated that at the meeting, there was no conclusion, no agreement. It was left that Youth Soccer would discuss the proposal and respond to Mr. O'Connell. Mr. O'Connell did not hear from them and he called Mr. Tessitore prior to the start of the season. He and Mr. Tessitore met and discussed Mr. Tessitore suggested that one of the fields at Witek be divided into three play areas for Youth Soccer games. Mr. O'Connell brought this suggested to Public Works and the Athletic Director. Mr. Orazetti raised some question as to the CIAC reaction to this lining of the field. Mr. O'Connell returned to Mr. Tessitore and asked whether the field could be divided into two areas to support game play for the older players. This would allow for one-third of the Youth Soccer program to utilize Witek Park while the remaining two-thirds would utilize Bradley for the fall program. Mr. Tessitore's answer to that was no. Mr. O'Connell was distressed by the miscommunication. Mr. O'Connell noted the communication from Mr. Gerckens and he noted that the entire program utilizes the facility on Tuesdays and Thursdays leaving the remainder of the week empty. Possibly the parking problems could be lessened if the use was spread over more days. Other concerns by Mr. Gerckens in his letter could also be explored and resolved with further discussion but balance is needed.

Chairman Walsh noted that when Witek Park was developed, the Commission felt this was a great start but not a full solution to all the programs needs. Certainly, exclusive facilities for each of the programs would be ideal but not realistic due to the limitations of land and financial support.

Mr. Gerckens thanked the Commission for the opportunity to discuss the matter. He does understand the great efforts that the Commission makes given the limitations. He felt the problem lies with communication. He indicated that the appearance was that something was not right and that the Youth Soccer was being treated unfairly. With great concern for the youth he sought a resolution.

Mr. O'Connell indicated that none of the directors reached out to him based on that initial discussion. The Youth Soccer was not totally prohibited from Witek Park but rather they were asked to balance the activity. Mr. Gerckens noted the logistical difficulties of having players spread out in different facilities. Mr. O'Connell noted that no town in the valley has the luxury of having a program within in one site. He noted other towns where programs are spread out in multiple locations. Mr. O'Connell acknowledged Mr. Tessitore's commitment to Youth Soccer and he could appreciate the efforts Mr. Tessitore has made over the years in the best interest of the program.

Mr. Waleski noted that when Witek Park was proposed there was great opposition and there still is a level of opposition to the soccer fields. The opposition went along with the idea with the understanding the use would be for the youth, no adult soccer. Many objected to the adult use and it was a very sensitive and controversial issue. There is very little recreational use on the east side. There is informal thought to connecting the open space at the Onopiak property to Witek Park through a trail system some time in the future. Citizens continue to watch Witek Park because many are not completely sure that the run-off will not have an effect on the reservoirs and the dam. He raised these comments so as to enlighten and bring attention to these ongoing reservations.

Mr. Benanto noted that the city basically has four fields. If both the high school programs were to move to DeFilippo Field, there would be over eighty (80) games played there. Usually, the maximum recommended number of games for a field surface is thirty (30). We are trying to balance the use of the fields and to try to accommodate everyone. This Commission does not give special treatment to anyone. They are always trying to do the best for the entire City. A comment earlier in the meeting that he took exception to is the charter reference regarding the priority to the youth, he noted that the high school students are still the youth of the City and the separation of the two was unjust. Nothing is ever done by this Commission to slight any one group.

Mr. Cota indicated that being a newer member of the Commission he has consistently seen the struggles with the fields and the desire to balance and to be fair. When he heard the proposal to strive for the balance of use of the facilities, the proposal seemed very viable. This Commission welcomes everyone to discussion recreational matters at any of the meetings and unfortunately it is rare to have some come and discuss things with the Commission members. Mr. O'Connell works diligently with the programs to try to accommodate the needs to the best of the abilities available to him. Certainly, the youth of the city are a high priority.

Mr. Gerckens thanked the members. He felt that the discussion has relieved his concerns. With his invitation to serve on the Soccer Board he hopes to keep the lines of conversation open.

CORRESPONDENCES: Nothing was presented.

DIRECTOR REPORTS:

Parks & Recreation Director's Report: Mr. O'Connell noted the fall programs finishing. Pop Warner has two more weeks of play and the possibility of a team going to the finals.

Registration for Basketball will be started shortly. Plans are to continue the 5th -8th grade basketball travel program on the weekends at the Derby Veteran's Community Center.

Mr. O'Connell will be meeting with the Capital Planning Commission to review the quotes for the Little League fence project in the minor league backstop area. It is the area between the plate and the two side areas. The existing fencing has worn out and there are some areas of safety concerns that will be addressed with this new fence. As costs have escalated, Little League has expressed a willingness to assist in the expense.

Mr. O'Connell was uncertain as to the skate park's usage during the season and the closure date. He will research and report next month.

High School Athletic Director's Report: Mr. Orazetti stated that the Senior Night Soccer game will be held next week. They are looking to use DeFilippo field for the use of the lights the last game at Witek is scheduled for October 25th.

Mr. Orazetti indicated that the Middle School project is considering a 100 ft by 200 ft field with no defined use. With sixth graders at the school, the law requires an area for the students to use for physical education and exercise use.

Mr. Benanto indicated that the proposed size is really too small for much greater use than a playground. Certainly, a larger 200 ft by 200 ft. could be better utilized especially if the surface is to be artificial turf. Chairman Walsh has spoken to the new superintendent and encouraged him to review the long-range plan for recreation. While effective use is a consideration, the financial costs are a primary consideration. Discussions of the field are very preliminary.

NEW or OTHER BUSINESS:

Mr. Clynch questioned what the picnic grove is used for and what is the size. Mr. O'Connell indicated that freshman football practices there as does Pop Warner. The long range plan had shown the picnic area transformed into a full size field. If the City could go without a picnic grove, maybe this area is a consideration. The schedule for weekend use for rental of the facility is generally completely filled through the course of the season.

Mr. Clynch acknowledged Mr. Gerckens for coming forward to speak on the Youth Soccer's behalf. He was dismayed that the directors did not come to speak with the Commission. He also wanted to recognize Mr. Gerckens father who in the past was very active in recreation in the city and it was refreshing to see him following in his father's tradition.

Motion was made by James Benanto and second by Beverly Moran. Move to adjourn the meeting at 8:15 pm. Motion carried unanimously.

Respectfully prepared,
Karen Kemmesies, secretary

These minutes are subject to the Commission's approval at their next scheduled meeting.