

SUMMARY MINUTES

ISLAMORADA, VILLAGE OF ISLANDS PARKS & RECREATION CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, January 10, 2024
Meeting started at 4:07 p.m. at the Founders Park Community Center

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

PRESENT:

Alina Davis, Carolyn Wightman, Richard Russell, Ted Benbow, Christy Hughes, Natasha Early, David Epstein, Eduardo Suarez, John Weare, Maria Bagiotti (IVOI), Anne Onsgard (IVOI), Alicia Mote (IVOI)

ABSENT:

Shannon Cary, Joseph Jannach; justified.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman asked Heather Head to lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES: John Weare motioned to approve the amended April minutes and the November minutes. Natasha Early seconded the motion, the motion passed unanimously (7-0)

EMERGENCY AGENDA ADDITIONS OR DELETIONS: None

PUBLIC COMMENT: Carolyn announced that public comment will be held to a 5-minute maximum. She also reminded the Committee that the High School Baseball Field Improvement Project is on hold because there is no completed legal agreement between the Village or the Park or School Board. Islamorada Resident Captain Ed Davidson mentioned his concerns about artificial turf. He stated that California has banned the use of artificial turf due to sports injuries. He also stated that negotiations regarding the baseball field improvements have been going on for two years, and it is concerning to him that it is still unclear what is wanted for this project. He mentioned that within the original permit's wording, the field was to be used from 2:30pm to sunset by the school, which meant that from sunrise to 2:30pm the field should be for community use every day of the year. He also has concerns about the drainage system, which may pull water away from the surrounding trees and be problematic. Islamorada Resident Sandi Bisceglia spoke to remind the Committee that most people in the keys live on very small lots and consider Founders Park their grass or "backyard", and she is happy to hear that there will be a 5-year plan for Founders Park. She mentioned that grass might be thought of as a "small thing" but it is actually a "big thing" when not many people have grass in their own backyards. She is glad there will be transparency in needs for timelines regarding

affordability, what is really needed, what is a “wish list”, and what will serve most of the resident taxpayer user groups of our nature park, not just small groups. She stated that the original plan for Founders Park was not to become a large parking lot or commercial sports arena, instead it was meant to provide quiet enjoyment for Islamorada Residents

PRESENTATION – UPDATE ON VILLAGE CONSERVATION PROPERTIES (FLORIDA COMMUNITY TRUST) – PETER FREZZA, ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCE MANAGER:

Peter Frezza presented on the Conservation Properties within Islamorada. He stated that Islamorada has over 150 acres of conservation properties. He stated there are 5 parks within Islamorada that were acquired with funding through the State of Florida through the Florida Community Trust program. The Village was required to establish a Management Plan for each park because they are funded and overseen by the State. Many items in the Management Plans have not been followed through with, and Peter works to ensure these items and projects are fulfilled.

Plantation Tropical Preserve includes walking paths, a children’s memorial, a kayak launch, and a gravel area purchased with a vision of a new entrance into the park, as the current entrance is right off the busy US-1 highway. The gravel area, intended to become a small parking area with a pavilion, was turned into an area to plant more trees, after the Council decided they no longer wanted it. The Village is now in the permitting phase of building a small pavilion near the original entrance for shade and seating.

Plantation Hammock Preserve is an 8-acre property located next door to Founders Park. Not much improvement has been made since it was acquired in 2002, and there currently isn’t a plan to add more to this park, although Peter hopes to make some improvements so that it can be a little more user-friendly. Maria asked Peter what “passive recreation or amenities” means to him. Peter said that it would mean there aren’t any hardened surfaces, like where a sport would be played. They are more for general non-sporting activities like walking, bird watching, and wildlife viewing. David mentioned that having a kayak launch near the water in that park would be beneficial as it’s currently somewhat dangerous to launch a kayak there. John asked Peter if there are any restrictions for signage to be put up within this park, as he has seen dogs and smoking where they are not allowed down near the water’s edge. He suggested that a “no dogs/no smoking” sign be placed near the water, and Peter agreed it would be a great idea and stated he will get a sign installed. Alina asked Peter why Plantation Hammock Preserve is not dog friendly, and Peter was not sure, and mentioned it might be something that can be changed.

Southwinds Park was managed by J.C. Mikula and the Islamorada Foundation for many years. The lease between them and the Village ended almost two years ago, and now the Village has control of the park which is almost completely built out according to the Management plan. The only item missing is a small, covered gazebo and children’s playground equipment. 250 native plants and trees were also planted on this property

recently. Maria asked if there are any other future plans for this park, and Peter stated there are not, as the park is pretty much built out and meant for conservation and green spaces.

Green Turtle Hammock Preserve has been developed by the Village over the past few years. The Village also has a lease agreement with the Florida Bay Forever group, and they are using the historic Russell Cottage as their home base and an environmental education center. Peter is happy to report that he has finally received bids for the building of the proposed pavilion near the water, and hopefully the construction for the pavilion and parking area will begin this year. The Village has a contract with ASAP Marine to work on the waterfront re-stabilization. This will also include an ADA-accessible kayak launch and improved access to the water. The pavilion will be a two-story building with a scenic outlook.

The official build-out of Key Tree Cactus Preserve has just been completed. Unfortunately, a week after the work was finished, a car accident on the highway caused damage to the entrance gate, making the gate unable to be opened, and the park had to be closed. A contractor is lined up to fix the gate, and Peter hopes it will be open again soon. The Key Tree Cactus plant remains in only 5 spots in the keys, and this park has one of the largest populations of it. The park includes a kayak launch, boardwalk, and a public restroom. Peter also mentioned that he has not forgotten a suggestion John made in a previous meeting, about making some kind of walking connection between Key Tree Cactus and Green Turtle Hammock Preserve. Unfortunately, it hasn't happened yet, but it is not a dead idea. The parking lot area is limited, and Peter accepted suggestions to put signage stating visitors must park at an angle or parallel. Natasha mentioned she would like children to be more involved in these educational conservation properties and asked Peter if there is someone who conducts field trips with local schools to these different properties. Peter stated that the Director of the Florida Bay Forever organization is doing just that, leading tours and events for school children at these parks.

INTRODUCTION AND PROGRAM REPORT – HEATHER HEAD, PLANTATION KEY FITNESS:

Heather Head has been the Fitness Instructor at Founders Park for 9 years. Currently she teaches 3 classes a day, 5 days a week. She gave a brief explanation of the different types of classes she offers, which include Strength Training, Yoga, Zumba, and Chair Yoga Dance. She teaches participants of all ages, even up to 98 years old. Maria mentioned that Heather is very special because she does it all, and it's very hard to find a Fitness instructor that can teach all of these different classes. Heather lives most of the year up north and does not hold classes during the summertime. John asked Heather if she could continue her classes through the summer if she had an air-conditioned space. Heather stated that most of her participants are snowbirds who leave before summer begins, so unfortunately it would not be helpful to have an indoor space, as her participation numbers would be very low during the summer anyway.

PARKS AND RECREATION DIRECTOR'S REPORT

SPECIAL EVENTS AND PROGRAMS REPORT:

Anne Onsgard presented on special events and ongoing activities. She mentioned that the first annual Family Friendly New Year's Celebration and Laser Light Show was a success with about 1500 participants. Carolyn asked if this type of show could be considered for 4th of July instead of fireworks. Anne explained that it could be a possibility, but it's a decision by the Upper Keys Rotary Club, as they host that annual event. Maria said she spoke with Rotarian Terry Abel and it is being considered, as well as possibilities of a drone show, which has become a popular option recently as well. Carolyn mentioned that these shows are beneficial as they are not invasive, loud, and do not leave any residue on the environment like fireworks do.

Anne presented the upcoming Beats on the Bay Event, Kendell Marvel "Outlaw Country" music event on Friday, February 16th. The Youth Council also came up with the idea for the upcoming Teen Night Out Bonfire and Movie event on Friday, January 19th. A Cana Flamenca music event in collaboration with ICE will be held on January 26th. She also mentioned upcoming Birding Classes, Nature Walks, and Nature Lecture Series. An upcoming Pro Pickleball Clinic will be happening on January 23rd and 24th, as well as the annual Triples Tennis Tournament on February 3rd. A new event happening at the park is the Mark Sorensen Youth Sailing "Buccaneer Blast" Regatta, on the beach and great lawn on February 3rd and 4th.

FOUNDERS PARK MASTER PLAN:

Maria presented the directions given by the Village Council at the December 12th meeting. They directed staff to look into hiring an engineering firm to help staff and the community come up with an overall master plan for the park. The Village has a library of contractors that can be utilized. The Council can also choose to go out to bid to use other companies. This plan will include pickleball courts, public works building and Council Chambers, the marina trailer parking area, and other items the Committee has discussed previously. Maria mentioned the importance of having enough parking for all facilities and events happening within the park. She stated staff will give information to the Council at the upcoming February 12th meeting on the direction they want to move in for this engineering firm option. This will include a conceptual plan and workshops to receive feedback from the public on different proposed projects. Ted asked Maria if the prices for non-residents to use the park have been raised recently. She stated they have not, it's been about 8 years since they were last changed. She also mentioned that is something staff have been talking about, but she wanted to educate new Committee members on what we do, and then staff will start to bring items that need to be looked at to the Committee for review. David asked if Maria could provide an update on the former Island Silver and Spice property during the next meeting. Maria stated she would get more information on that for him.

UPDATE – CORAL SHORES HIGH SCHOOL BASEBALL FIELD AT FOUNDERS PARK:

Maria stated that a brief update was given at the December 12th Council meeting, but there isn't much happening at the moment. The Village Attorney and the School Board will be meeting to come to an agreement, as the previous agreement is no longer valid.

Alina suggested that the School Board consider building the baseball field on the large field located at the old Island Christian School property, or at the Cemex plant in Tavernier.

COMMITTEE DISCUSSION:

John stated he has researched artificial turf since the last meeting and discovered that recent studies of injuries are associated with the design of cleats, rather than the type of turf played on. He stated the number one cause of injury on baseball fields specifically is faulty sprinkler systems that don't retract properly resulting in tripping, small holes dug by animals, and grass covering fenced areas that result in accidentally being stepped on. He reminded the Committee that his previous recommendation to enclose the prospected facility is not to keep any user groups out but to preserve and protect the facility from being damaged or vandalized during off hours. Christy Hughes mentioned that she has teenage children and briefly thanked staff for creating the teen events and allowing them to have things to do in the community.

FUTURE ITEMS: Park Fees, Silver and Spice Property usage.

ADJOURNMENT:

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman set the next meeting date as TBD. Ted Benbow made a motion to adjourn, Carolyn Wightman seconded. The meeting ended at 5:51 P.M.

Recording Secretary,

Alicia Mote

Minutes Approved by Committee on

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman _____.