

SUMMARY MINUTES

ISLAMORADA, VILLAGE OF ISLANDS PARKS & RECREATION CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, March 11, 2025

Meeting started at 5:00p.m. at the Founders Park Community Center

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

PRESENT:

Carolyn Wightman, Natasha Early, Christy Hughes, Ted Benbow, John Weare, Joseph Jannach, Alina Davis, Richard Russell, Shannon Cary, Eduardo Suarez, Maria Bagiotti (IVOI), Anne Onsgard (IVOI), Alicia Mote (IVOI), Jane Gillette (IVOI)

ABSENT:

David Epstein - Unjustified

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman asked John Weare to lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM MEETINGS:

October 23, 2024 minutes were unanimously approved by the Committee. Natasha moved to approve; Joe seconded the motion.

EMERGENCY AGENDA ADDITIONS OR DELETIONS:

Program and Special Event Report – Anne Onsgard

Alligator Lighthouse Update – Rob Dixon

Capital Projects Update – Maria Bagiotti

PUBLIC COMMENT: Captain Ed Davidson asked if Public Comment will be available after the Founders Park Master Plan update. Maria and Carolyn agreed that there will be public comment following the presentation.

HIGHSCHOOL SWIM & DIVE TEAM ACHIEVEMENTS: Swim Coach Jon Olsen introduced a group of his team swimmers that have been training with him for the past 13 years. He mentioned that his swimmers practice an average of 15 hours a week, both before and after school hours, at a total of about 25 miles per week, 1200 miles per year. A few of his female athletes are currently preparing for a competition in Pembroke Pines, as well as the annual locally hosted swim meet at the end of April. He gave a summary of achievements acquired during this year's high school swim season. The female swimmers finished 4th in the district, while the male swimmers finished 5th. The team qualified 13 swimmers for the regional championships in Davie, FL, which is the most that have ever qualified. Carolyn asked Jon to explain the size of the district in which they compete. Jon stated that the district consists of 15 teams from all over Miami Dade and Monroe counties.

Coral Shores is in the Class 1A at the state level. He mentioned that although the schools they compete against are similar in size, they are preparatory schools that recruit their athletes, train their athletes in a college-like program, and are a funneling system for Division 1 college swimming athletes. Out of 60 teams in the division, there are typically only 2-3 public schools competing. Coral Shores Highschool is consistently ranked 1st or 2nd in public schools in the division. The female swimmers placed 7th at the Regional Championships and went on to the State Championships where they placed 33rd out of 60 teams, being the highest-ranking public-school team. Jon introduced a few of his swimmers that were sitting in the crowd and mentioned that his swimmers are competing against swimmers that will swim at Division 1 colleges next year and compete in the Olympics in the next 3-4 years. Jon invited Committee members to come watch the competition during their annual invitation swim meet on April 25th, 26th and 27th.

ALLIGATOR LIGHTHOUSE UPDATE:

Islamorada Resident, Friends of the Pool member and Masters Swimmer Rob Dixon gave a brief history and update on the Alligator Lighthouse restoration. He stated that the idea all started at Founders Park when they created the Friends of the Pool organization to raise money for programs. The Swim for Alligator Lighthouse event was then created to bring awareness to this area and the need for restoration. 7-8 years later, the opportunity to put in an application to purchase the lighthouse came up, and Rob worked many hours to fill out the application and ended up getting approved. He then created a group of board members that have done extensive research, an engineering study and fundraising to be able to restore the lighthouse. The engineers are now drawing up plans for a landing platform, a walkway across the area, a stairway up to the first level and decking. He asked Committee members to spread the word to anyone who may be able to help expedite the next step of permitting, as well as fundraising. Friends of the Pool is a 501c3 organization that has helped raise money for the Lighthouse as well as for scholarship funds for local swimmers. Alina asked Rob what the estimated cost would be for the restoration, and he exclaimed it would be 5-6 million dollars. The lighthouse has been standing since 1872.

PUBLIC COMMENT – CAPTAIN RICHARD BLACK:

Fishing Guide Captain Richard Black spoke about the importance of being able to use the boat ramp at Plantation Yacht Harbor Marina at Founders Park as intended in the past for fishing guide use. He mentioned that as the corporate world has come in and purchased many of the marinas in Islamorada, fishing guides are worried that they are losing places to launch their boats. Last year, he had brought up an idea of a secondary boat ramp built at PYHM for guide use, but the area in question was not ideal and it was not well received by the Nearshore Water Committee. He would like the current boat ramp to be available during times that are practical for fishing guides. Currently the boat ramp opens at 8:00am, but most fishing guides need to launch well before that. He mentioned that he feels many of the PYHM liveaboard residents have high influence in these decisions, but they are not Islamorada taxpayers. Richard also mentioned that the current boat ramp is not well constructed, and there are a lot of issues with the design. Ted mentioned that boaters are

unable to launch their boats safely by themselves, it is at least a two-person job which makes it difficult for guides to run their businesses out of that ramp. He stated that he used to have a slip near the boat ramp and currently launches out of the Lorelai marina. However, the Lorelai is for up for sale and he is concerned that the prospective new owner will be a corporation that will not care about the livelihoods of fishing guides. He is concerned that the Charter Boat Association is in danger. Richard expressed concern regarding the current boat ramp hours, and Ted mentioned that the average guide does many sunset tarpon trips during tarpon season, and there is nowhere that they can launch during that time. Richard gave a few examples of other marinas in Monroe County that have come up with successful solutions for longer hours and easier access, including 24-hour access with camera systems and automated ticketing systems. John Weare asked Richard if he had started dialogue with Lisa Watts, PYHM Dockmaster. He stated that he personally has not, but Councilwoman Sharon Mahoney has spoken to her several times. He expressed his biggest concern as a property owner in Islamorada, is that he feels they do not have the rights that other municipalities in the Keys have to their city marinas. Ted agreed that he feels that people are renting spaces in the marina and benefitting from Village taxpayer dollars, and the Village taxpayers are not able to rent these spaces. Carolyn stated that as this seems to be a bigger and very important issue, it should be a separate conversation and possibly a future meeting discussion. Ted stated that it will be on the Council agenda in the coming months and it needs to be talked about by this Committee before then. Alina mentioned that she has observed Council members being very against this idea at the marina because “it hasn’t worked in the past”, although there are many technological advancements available today to create easier access. She also brought up the distinction between Founders Park and Plantation Yacht Harbor Marina being separate entities and departments with separate staff. Ted reiterated that there are no boat ramps or parking available in the Village.

Islamorada Resident Sandi Bisceglia mentioned that she is in support of Richard Black’s proposal and mentioned that the Enterprise fund that is managed by the marina has 6 million dollars in the account, and she thinks maybe they can find a way to support the taxpayers as requested.

WALL OF FAME PRESENTATION:

Islamorada Resident, Friends of the Pool member and Masters swimmer Beth Kaminstein proposed an idea for a dedicated wall space at the Ron Levy Aquatic Center that would encompass plaques, pictures, and a system for athletic record keeping honoring the history, accomplishments, contributions and achievements of individuals involved in Islamorada’s aquatic programs. She stated that world class diving coach Ron O’Brien lived in Islamorada for many years and helped design the Ron Levy Aquatic Center. Ron O’Brien has recently passed away, and Beth feels he should be honored and all he has done for the Islamorada swimming community. She feels this wall should include different sections on the history of the facility, famous swimmers who have visited, accomplishments and records of current and past swim athletes and programs, open water swim accomplishments including Alligator Lighthouse swims and triathlons, visiting swim teams and more.

Carolyn expressed that she thinks this is a great idea. John Weare mentioned that this project could be incorporated into the upcoming pool resurfacing timeline. Carolyn suggested that a volunteer committee be formed to come up with ideas and design for the project. John Weare, Joe Jannach and Alina Davis volunteered to be part of the committee.

FOUNDERS PARK MASTER PLAN UPDATE:

Liudmila “Lumy” Fuentes from Miller Legg and Associates presented the Committee with updates on the Founders Park Master Plan progress. She presented a timeline that began back in July 2024 at the beginning of the Master Plan process. She mentioned that throughout this process, they have met with different focus groups, including this Committee and other civic groups throughout the community. After the meetings, a site analysis was conducted, and data was collected. They then hosted a visioning workshop, that she mentioned was unfortunately not well attended, so they followed up with a public engagement survey that was available from December 2024 to February 2025, and they received those results about two weeks ago. Currently they are working on the draft Master Plan. Once this is completed, they will be hosting a Draft Master Plan Workshop towards the end of April or beginning of May. After the workshop, they will complete a Final Master Plan and a presentation. The public engagement survey was sent out via mail to households across the Village of Islamorada, as well as an open-access link available online for anyone to complete. 4,450 surveys were mailed out, and they received back 860 completed surveys, which is 12% of the population. She mentioned that this number may not seem very high but typically they only see 1-2% completion. She presented a summary of the findings through the survey, which included strong community engagement, broadly used facilities rated highest in importance, facilities are meeting community needs, community satisfaction exceeds perceived importance for most facilities, preference for improvements over new construction, and top priorities for future improvements. She also mentioned that current, ongoing and future planned projects are also being considered when drafting the Master Plan. More information and updates will be posted on the Islamorada website. Carolyn strongly suggested that the PYH marina be represented in the Master Plan decision making as well, based on the presented request for boat ramp access. Alina asked for more information on the baseball field renovation. Maria stated she has not yet received an update on that project, but she will have an update by the next meeting.

FOUNDERS PARK BREAKWATER & NATURE VIEWING AREA:

Environmental Resources Manager Peter Frezza presented an update on the recently repaired and restored Breakwater area at Founders Park. The 65-year-old structure was heavily eroded from sea-level rise and storm surge over the past few decades. The Breakwater has been elevated about two feet; repairs were completed in late 2024 and it appears to be highly successful. The main purpose of this structure is to serve as a breakwater to protect the marina infrastructure, however it is also an ecologically interesting and unique structure that allows for nature and wildlife viewing. We are currently in a monitoring phase due to the mitigation of new mangroves that had to be previously removed. This mangrove monitoring phase will continue for 6 more years. In

the past the breakwater had been used for fishing, but moving forward it will be strictly for nature viewing, as the rock elevation is dangerous if people attempt to climb the coral rock. New rules for the Breakwater in addition to the regular park rules will include NO fishing, NO climbing on the rocks, NO bicycles, “OneWheels” or motorized scooters, No tents or canopies, No anchoring to rock shoreline, and No feeding the wildlife. This breakwater has become increasingly popular for snorkeling, which is incompatible with fishing. Anne Onsgard mentioned that these new rules and restrictions will help with maintenance, to discourage things like litter, fishing line and hooks, broken glass, and alcohol consumption on the Breakwater. She also mentioned that the Islamorada Youth Council would like to sponsor a Community Service project in April, where they will help with the mangrove planting and restoration. Natasha asked how guests would get into the water to snorkel near the Breakwater. Anne said most people will swim out past the protected swim zone from the beach area for access, and staff always recommend that guests take necessary safety precautions with proper dive flags. John mentioned that continuing law enforcement presence at the park during the busy summer season will help with enforcement of these new rules. Ted suggested making a bucket system available for guests to help pick up trash at the Breakwater, as he has seen in other parks in Florida. Ted also asked Peter what the total cost was to finish this project. Peter stated it was 2 million dollars and fully grant funded. As the Breakwater is not yet open to the public, Carolyn suggested that a time could be coordinated so that Committee members can tour the Breakwater and see all of the improvements. Joe motioned to support staff in their proposal for the new Breakwater rules including no fishing. Ted seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved (10-0).

PROGRAM AND SPECIAL EVENT UPDATE:

Anne Onsgard presented an update on recent events and programs happening in the park. This year’s Beats on the Bay Music Series had excellent attendance, including 1500+ people at the Lynyrd Skynyrd tribute last Friday, and will conclude with Bay Jam on April 13th. The park will be hosting a teen event this Friday, March 14th from 7:00-9:30pm for grades 6-8. The Springboard Dive Program run by Coach Kelly Owens attended their first dive meet. Diver August Babino placed 1st in the 8 to 9-year-old division, and Aaron Lykins (who is also a lifeguard at the pool) placed 5th in the 16 to 18-year-old division. 5 Junior Olympic athletes from the Synchronized Swimming program with Coach Isla Crawford just attended a meet in Texas. The park is hosting a Lifeguard Certification course April 4-6, Island Fest will be happening April 5-6, Swim Across America event on April 12th, and Florida Keys Swim Club Invitational Swim Meet from April 26-27.

Anne introduced the Park’s newest Recreation Coordinator Jane Gillette. Jane stated that she has been an Islamorada resident for 7 years, starting out working for the Sea Base, as she is a charter boat owner and captain through them. She has been working in events and events planning her entire life, and has been working in camps, program management and facilitation for the last 5 years through Sea Base. She expressed that she would like to highlight our current 18+ program for the month of March. On Wednesday nights from

7:00-9:00pm, the park is hosting crafting, painting, and board game nights. This program was created for young adults in the area who don't have access to many free things to do in the community. Another new program being held at the park this season is the Waves and Watercolors program, instructed by accomplished local artist Christine O'Neill. This is a month-long program where participants meet once a week on Thursdays, each session building on top of itself with new skills learned each week. The program began in January with 12 participants, grew to 16 participants in February, and 18 participants in March. Nature and Bird walks are held on Monday mornings and facilitated by our local naturalists Susan Kolterman and Rachel DiPietro, with an average of 5-6 participants per walk. Upcoming events that park staff are working on include Spring Fest and Summer Recreation Camp preparations.

CAPITAL PROJECTS UPDATE:

Maria Bagiotti presented current and future capital project updates. The solar lighting project has been completed, which has allowed for much better lighting throughout the park at night. Resurfacing the Basketball and Pickleball courts will begin the first or second week of May, and include replacement of the Pickleball court fencing. This project will take 2-3 weeks. The ADA accessible playground installation project will begin once the decision is made on where it will be located based on the Master Plan. She mentioned that due to TDC funding, the project cannot begin until after October 2025. The Pool and Locker Room renovation project is still in the planning process, and she will have another update by the next meeting date. Annie added that staff will be participating in a kickoff meeting for Recreation Management software which will improve management of facilities, program payments, memberships, and many other aspects of the Parks and Recreation department.

Shannon Cary mentioned that the Florida Keys Youth Soccer organization has 300-500 athletes ages 8-18 that use the soccer fields regularly for 10 months out of the year. She shared that 5 of their players were selected from the state of Florida to train with the Olympic Development program, and 5 players have been asked to play internationally this year. She shared her appreciation for the park being supportive of the program and allowing space for these kids to play.

Joe mentioned that due to the lack of consultation with staff and the Parks and Recreation committee regarding the need for a Master Plan in the past, he would like to see Council Members consult staff and the Committee before making important decisions like these in the future. He expressed his frustration that the Committee was presented with this information after the decision had been made by Council and was not given a chance to discuss. He feels it is important that the Parks and Recreation Committee be utilized in these decisions regarding Founders Park, to get necessary feedback from the community.

Carolyn asked staff to find out the dates of the upcoming Master Plan workshops in May and coordinate a date for the next Parks and Recreation Committee meeting based on those dates.

FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS:

PYH Marina Boat Ramp usage for fishing guides

Pool Resurfacing Project Update

Baseball Field Renovation Project Update

ADJOURNMENT:

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman set the next regular meeting date as TBD, sometime before the Master Plan workshops in June. Joseph Jannach made a motion to adjourn, Ted Benbow seconded. The meeting ended at 7:12 P.M.

Recording Secretary,

Alicia Mote

Minutes Approved by Committee on
Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman _____.