

SUMMARY MINUTES

ISLAMORADA, VILLAGE OF ISLANDS PARKS & RECREATION CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Thursday, July 10, 2025
Meeting started at 5:06p.m. at the Founders Park Community Center

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

PRESENT:

Carolyn Wightman, Natasha Early, Ted Benbow, David Epstein, John Weare, Joseph Jannach (via Zoom), Christy Hughes, Richard Russell, Alina Davis, Maria Bagiotti (IVOI), Anne Onsgard (IVOI)

ABSENT:

Shannon Cary - Justified

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman asked Community Member Cheryl Culverson to lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM MEETINGS:

Richard Russell motioned to approve the minutes from both March and May meetings.

EMERGENCY AGENDA ADDITIONS OR DELETIONS:

Moved item VIII – Park and Pool Fees Discussion to next meeting.

DISCUSSION ON FOUNDERS PARK BASEBALL FIELD – HOME OF CORAL SHORES HIGH SCHOOL BASEBALL – RON SAUNDERS, VILLAGE MANAGER:
Carolyn Wightman reminded the Committee that the objectives of tonight's meeting will be that the Committee will make a recommendation to Council, a discussion will be had to clarify the circumstances of the agreement between the Village and the Monroe County School Board regarding the Coral Shores Baseball Field, as well as the decision between using natural grass or artificial turf. Carolyn requested that Village Manager Ron Saunders begin the topic of discussion.

Ron recognized the attendance of Vice Mayor Don Horton and Council Member Anna Richards, as well as the Executive Director of Operations for Monroe County School District Pat Lefere, who will also be presenting information on the baseball field. He stated that documents detailing the latest design plan have been passed out to the public attending the meeting this evening. This preliminary design plan was approved on June 24th by the Monroe County School Board and was presented at the Village's workshop that same night. The only thing that has changed about this plan is the addition of more detail. The only document that has been approved so far is the Interlocal Agreement that was passed

by the Council and the School Board last year (Resolution 24-05-39). Within the ILA, it specifically requires that there be a Baseball License Agreement and a Use Agreement, which are yet to be negotiated. Ron stated he was unable to find any updates to the original Baseball License Agreement set back in 2000, but moving forward there will be a new agreement covered by the ILA. After the June 24th meeting, Ron spoke with the School Board Chairperson, because she had asked if the Village was going to provide any funding for this project. Referring to the recorded ILA Agreement under section 7, Ron stated that it says, "The recreation facility at the baseball field, and the acquisition of materials, equipment, etc. shall be the responsibility of, and paid for by, the School Board". He stated that there is no mention of the Village contributing any funds. The Village owns the property and will continue to do so, and he believes the Village's contribution is the fact that we are contributing use of the property. He also stated that he was told the 5-million-dollar amount was a place holder and preliminary to the design plan being finalized. Once the design plan was finished, the cost amount was 6.1 million dollars and any shortfall will be the responsibility of the School Board. Ron wanted to make it clear that although the Village owns the property that the baseball field occupies, the baseball field improvement project will be the sole responsibility of the School Board, including financially, and it will require full cooperation and agreement by the Village Council. Nothing will be done without it coming before the Council.

David Epstein asked who would be responsible for the sustainment (maintenance) of the facility over the next 10 years or so. Ron explained that the agreement states this is to be determined, and in order to determine this responsibility a decision will first need to be made on whether the grass will be natural or artificial. This decision will make a significant difference in maintenance and costs. Ron read section 13 of the ILA, stating "The Village and the School Board agree that the billing for all materials and services for any construction or renovation of the recreation facility should be made to and paid by the School Board. Billings for maintenance related costs shall be sent to the Village by the School Board and paid on a pro-rata basis. The Village will be responsible for invoicing the School Board for electrical and water charges based on meter readings of the amounts of electricity and water used for scheduled activities as delineated in the Use Agreement for the recreational facility". He reiterated that the Use Agreement has not yet been negotiated, therefore the details of this topic have not yet been discussed. He feels that the ILA agreement protects and sets parameters for the Village as well as lays out the responsibilities for the School Board. Ron stated he would really like to see decisions made tonight on the recommendation of either grass or artificial turf, and the locations of the buildings proposed in the preliminary design. He asked Public Works Director Andrew Engelmeyer to spray paint the exact locations of the proposed new buildings on the baseball facility.

Ted Benbow asked if the cost of this project will affect Islamorada taxpayer dollars. He mentioned that he has had community members tell him they do not want their tax dollars spent on this project. He also asked if it would be safe to assume that if money is not spent

on this project, it will go to Key West as it has in the past. Ron stated that would be an assumption regarding the School District that he is not able to speak to, and Pat Lefere may be able to answer that question. However, he stated that property taxes are paid to the Village as well as the School Board, but the School Board makes their own decision on where that money is spent.

Ted asked if someone would be available to inform the Committee on the cost per year to maintain grass versus artificial turf. Ron said that would be a question for Pat Lefere, but he would like to continue to get input and questions from the Committee, as there may be other questions that Pat can answer as well. Ron mentioned he has also appointed five community members to a “Baseball Field Task Force”: Alina Davis, Jamie Engel, Tony Hammon, Brian Cone and Capt. Richard Black, and they have been helpful in bringing issues to his attention. Ted asked if the footprint of the proposed new field and sports complex will be any larger than the current footprint that is being used today. Ron deferred to Pat for confirmation. Ted also asked if the field could be open to other sports, teams, or the public when not being used by the baseball team during season, and if the concession stand could be open for sales daily, rather than only during sporting events. Richard mentioned that the facility will always be available for other use outside of the 5 months that is baseball season. He also mentioned that he no longer calls the facility a baseball field, instead it is a multi-use field that is also available for groups like flag football, lacrosse, soccer and softball. Ted asked if the field ends up being artificial turf, could it be used for vendors during events like the Gigantic Nautical Market. Richard mentioned he has spoken with Rotarians, and they agree the area could be used for non-food-related vendors.

Ron quoted the ILA “The Village and School Board delegate authority to the Village Manager or designee and the Superintendent or designee, negotiate and enter into a recreational-use agreement annually providing for the schedule of use for such year that may be amended from time to time, in writing, as needed”. He stated that for the first year, it has already been discussed that the field will be available for community use during the off-season. Joe Jannach questioned why we should be obligated to allow non-Islamorada residents access to this facility. He stated that the park is designated for Islamorada residents, and he has heard this concern from many people in the community. He is not keen on having hundreds of kids that are not from Islamorada using the park and facilities. Christy Hughes asked for specification on what the 5-million-dollar placeholder was for, and will there be moments during the year when the baseball complex is locked and unavailable for anyone to use without authorization. Ron deferred to Pat for the answer to her first question and mentioned that her second question would be governed by a use agreement, but the baseball team would have priority during baseball season and believes that the rest of the year should be up to the Village to decide on access and use. Ron stated that the use agreement can be revisited and possibly amended annually, whereas the ILA is long term. The use agreements will also depend on whether the field ends up being natural grass or artificial turf. Richard mentioned that if there is ever a conflict during

baseball season regarding use of the field or nearby areas of the park, they've always been cooperative and closed the field down so as not to interfere with or complicate these events.

David Epstein stated that although it seems the consensus is that natural grass is more restricted in use, and turf is more resilient, it is actually the opposite. If turf is damaged from excessive use (i.e. vendors at events like the Nautical Market), it will be permanently damaged and cannot be easily replanted like natural grass. He also mentioned that turf would be much more expensive to replace than natural grass. Alina Davis asked that if there is no estimate of costs to maintain, how can the Committee decide on recommending a type of grass to Council. Ron stated that is why a use agreement has not been executed, because it would specify who is responsible regarding field usage and maintenance. During a previous design meeting, he questioned what the difference is in installation cost between natural and artificial grass, and he was told there is not much of a price difference. He also asked about the cost of maintenance and was told by Pat that the official policy of the school district moving forward is that all athletic fields from Key Largo to Key West will be artificial turf. He stated that Miller Legg and associates had done research nationally and recommended in the Master Plan that the other fields within Founders Park should also be artificial turf. Ron ultimately expressed that there are good arguments for both grass options, and that is ultimately why the decision is being brought to the Committee. Alina reminded the Committee that although there are sports facilities throughout Monroe County, Founders Park is "our park".

Christy asked if the School Board had considered purchasing property to place this baseball field that would solely belong to the School District, and they would have complete control over the facility. Ron stated that during the June 24th workshop, this question was brought up by Mayor Sharon Mahoney and Pat said that this had been looked into, and they could not find a suitable area for this facility. Tony Hammon personally stated during that workshop that currently there is no other piece of property in the upper keys that is suitable for this facility. Ted asked that if the Village and the School Board do not come to an agreement on the yearly use agreement, is the Village responsible for paying the School Board back for the facility costs and investments. Ron mentioned that there is a two-year cancellation provision. He stated he does not anticipate that happening but there could be consequences if an agreement is not reached. Ron quoted section 14 of the ILA titled Tangible Property upon Termination of Agreement: "The Village and School Board agree that upon termination of this agreement, the title to all tangible property included, the recreational facility will be in the name of the Village, unless such tangible property is completely removed from the Founders Park baseball site by the School Board at the full expense of the School Board. If the agreement is terminated by the Village prior to its normal expiration date, the Village shall pay the School Board in the amount equal to the adjusted value of the recreational facility and all associated tangible property constructed, installed, or placed by the School Board at the Founders Park baseball field site." Teds concern is that future Council members may decide the facility is no longer wanted, and then a potential lawsuit may occur.

Pat Lefere introduced himself at the podium, and expressed his sincere appreciation to the Village Council, Parks and Recreation Committee, and citizens of Islamorada for the long term continued cooperation in the use of the Founders Park ball field. He stated that long ago it was decided that there was not enough room for a full athletic complex including a baseball field on the Coral Shores High School campus, and so the idea came about to share Founders Park with the high school regarding use of the baseball field. The partnership has been hugely successful throughout the years. He also explained that when the Monroe County School District's planning department puts together their capital projects, they have a 5- and 10-year plan where they look to see what the needs are across the school district. Those projects are planned over a series of years based on priority given by the school board. When they identify project needs, there is never a detailed scope of work, nor a design that could be costed out for those projects. Quite often they do their best estimate on what the cost of a project will be for the long-term capital project planning, and those costs get adjusted from year to year. The 5-million dollars that was originally set aside as a planning number for the baseball field project was carried for several years, but it wasn't until the first time they put a scope of work to a conceptual design that they were able to do any serious cost estimation. This is how the estimate changed from 5 million to 6.1 million. Those costs will be updated throughout the course of the design phase, and they will bring those numbers back to this Committee and the Council as they go through the design process. He and his team plan to come back to both groups with design, timeline and cost updates. He also wanted to make clear that this concept is not a Monroe County School District concept, it is very much a Coral Shores High School concept. The high school contacted Pat 4 years ago and asked him to come and listen to a plan they had envisioned for their baseball field which is now being called a multi-use field. The field will 100% be a multi-use field partnering with the Village of Islamorada and Founders Park. He mentioned that the decisions on how the field will be used (i.e. for sporting or larger community events) will determine what kind of turf/grass will be installed.

Ron stated he has requested if possible, that the Committee make a recommendation on the use of either grass or artificial turf today, because it will be difficult to enter into a use and maintenance agreement without knowing what type of surface will be included in the project. Ron asked if other areas in the upper keys had been looked at for a suitable new baseball field location, and could Coral Shores be used for a new field if they swapped out the track for the baseball field on campus. He also mentioned that all school district athletic fields from Key West to Key Largo will be recommended by the district to be artificial turf and asked Pat to clarify on this position. Pat stated that he does not believe they have been actively seeking but knows they are not aware of any other suitable properties for this project, and they are very familiar with different areas up and down the keys. Alina clarified that the swapping of the track for the baseball field would not result in the track being at Founders Park. She mentioned there is a piece of property for sale at mile marker 85 that because of its rectangular shape, she feels it could be a possible site for the track. Removing the track from the Coral Shores campus could make space for the baseball field to be

located on campus. Pat stated that is not something that has been looked into because it would come at a considerable increase in capital funding to purchase a property in addition to rebuilding the facility. Richard mentioned that trading the track for the baseball field would not be an even swap. The track has a much smaller footprint that could not fit a baseball field, which would require the tennis courts, concession stands, storage facilities and coaches' room to be removed, and the football field to be reoriented. He exclaimed that it would be a logistical nightmare.

Pat spoke on the subject of the use agreement and cost. Currently there are costs being shared between the Village and the School Board on the maintenance of the existing field. This agreement has been in place for many years, and the costs have ebbed and flowed through the years, especially in the last 5 years the School Board has invested a bit more to maintain it to a level that is required for high school baseball standards. He stated that the cost for a natural grass field in the long run would be less cost to the Village since the School Board is covering the cost of installation. The return on investment for the School Board will be the savings on maintenance costs if using an artificial turf surface. David asked how long the turf that is currently in Key West expected to last. Pat stated that the industry standard for the conditions we encounter in the Keys is about 10 years, however soon after he left his previous job as the Commanding Officer of the Naval Air Station, they installed an artificial field which has now been there for over 10 years and is still in fantastic shape. Ted asked if the footprint of this project will remain the same. Pat confirmed it would stay the same. Christy asked if this footprint includes the proposed new buildings. Pat expressed that the exterior perimeter would remain the same, the buildings within the exterior perimeter will change. Ted suggested that the Committee should walk over to the field to see the proposed field changes firsthand, because he had done it and it really changed his mind. Ron agreed it would be important to do that before making any recommendations to be able to see with their own eyes.

Carolyn recapped the current discussion and asked for confirmation that the School Board has decided all programs within Monroe County will use artificial turf. Pat corrected that there has been no Board decision in that regard, he stated that in most cases based on what he's seen in the last 10 years, artificial surfaces have been more advanced, durable, and environmentally friendly and would be his recommendation in almost all applications. Carolyn asked what steps the Committee can take to get more information to validate a decision on artificial turf, as in some type of expert reporting regarding safety, longevity, cost, etc. Pat stated that this type of information can be found anywhere on the internet, but it can be confusing because it is not conclusive. However, the research that the School Board facilities team has done concluded in recommendations to install artificial fields at the Key West location. They have taken into consideration safety, longevity, long term cost and environmental impact, and believe the turf is still the best solution in all aspects. Joe stated that he thinks the deciding factor between natural or artificial turf should be how much use the field will be getting regularly. If it will only be used for 13 baseball games a year, it doesn't seem feasible to use artificial turf, but if it is used as a multi-use field then

artificial turf will be more practical for extensive use. He believes that the Committee needs to decide how much of the community will have access to the field. He believes that the park was meant to be a green space used by the boating and fishing community, not for the baseball community. He would like to see natural grass and the baseball community only using the field during season. Richard mentioned that an idea was brought to him that if the field were to be multi-use, fundraisers with knock-off groups similar to the Savannah Bananas could be held at the field. He also mentioned that he has spent the last four years polling Athletic Directors and Coaches at both the college and high school levels, and universally without exception they all support moving to artificial turf. Moreover, in the last 20 years the use of artificial turf has gone up 400%, and the projections for the next 10 years is that the usage percentage will double, due to the durability and lessened environmental impacts. In the case of the Florida Keys, it would take pressure off the Aquaphor. In the last 10 years we've used 1 to 1.5 million gallons of water from the Biscayne Aquaphor. He was asked why the field was played on if it was reportedly in such bad shape, and he explained because there is no plan B option in the Keys. He mentioned as an example he has been questioned about using fertilizer with pesticides, herbicides and insecticides on the field before a game, and he had to give a similar answer stating either we fertilize now, or we can't play on the field. With the newly proposed facility, there will be a containment system in place so that the water can be diverted however necessary with underground plumbing. The current field does not have that, resulting in runoff going down to Founders Park beach and other areas.

Multiple Committee members feel that they do not have sufficient information to make a proper recommendation between natural or artificial turf currently. Alina expressed that she has heard and read arguments from both sides and has not been able to come to a conclusion. Joe reiterated that to decide on a turf type, a decision needs to be made regarding the use of the field, and he does not want it to turn into a complex for entertainment for anyone to use. He agrees with Alina that Founders Park is Islamorada's Park, not Monroe County or the School Board's Park. Ron believes that a few issues need to be put on the table for both options, including injuries, environmental impacts, and heat emission concerns with turf. This is why he asked Pat to attend the meeting, because he believes that his team would not have recommended turf to the School Board without doing the proper extensive research. Ted asked Richard if turf is safe for students to use. Richard responded that it is, and the turf technology of today is much more advanced than it was 30 years ago. He mentioned that with turf, the water usage would be drastically reduced, which would in turn help reduce strain on the Aquaphor. Artificial grass also requires much more upkeep to stay in pristine condition and is easily damaged. The two turf options are not easily comparable as it is not an apples-to-apples comparison. Pat agreed that the current natural grass in this Florida Keys environment has been incredibly challenging to maintain to a level of quality that has continued to rise over the years for all of their athletic programs, and is becoming insurmountable for the staff the size of the School District or any local municipalities to maintain to almost a professional level of quality which is what has become the expectation. Pat confirmed a question Ted asked, that there are also plans

to convert the Coral Shores Football field to turf. Alina asked how long the Key West baseball field has been turf, and Pat stated it's been 7-8 years. She also asked what the difference has been with maintenance and water costs between when it was grass and now that it is turf. Pat stated he does not have specific numbers but there have been significant savings, and the savings they had forecasted are coming to fruition. The outfield of the baseball field is also the football field during football season. Natasha stated that as an Islamorada resident, business owner, substitute teacher and mother, it is heartbreaking to hear that some Committee members basically do not want to support the children in the community in regard to the baseball field, but also to hear that they do not want others from Monroe County to use the Founders Park facilities. She is thankful that the School Board has come up with this plan to renovate the current baseball field to benefit the students at Coral Shores High School. She believes that people should be able to use the facilities, and we should be able to have nice facilities for our children.

Carolyn reiterated the importance of the Committee making a decision for recommendation on the type of surface, so that the project can move forward and address the other concerns of the Committee and community. Richard responded to an earlier question regarding the turf system. He spoke to the engineer of the turf that is being proposed for this project, and he quoted "The turf system is being designed as a closed drainage setup, it includes permeable turf, a free draining stone base, and a network of collector pipes below that water can be directed to an approved outlet or even reused in the system. Most importantly, it is fully controlled below grade and there is no untreated flow heading toward the Bay". He gave different options for organic turf material, including cork, coconut husk, olive pits, walnut shells, thermally modified wood, and other plant-based fibers, all of which would bring down the surface temperature and make it more ecologically friendly.

Maria stated that outside of baseball season, the Parks department manages the fields, including all of the youth organizations who use the park. These youth organizations include the Florida Keys Soccer Club with over 400 participants in the program, Upper Keys Youth Lacrosse Association for practices and an annual fundraising tournament, the Upper Keys Baseball Foundation – Little League and Youth Softball, Steady Bats for youth baseball clinics, Youth Flag Football with over 150 participants, and Parks programs including Adult Co-Ed Kickball, as well as general recreational use by children and families. Maria clarified a question that Alina asked that most of these organizations use the outfield of the baseball field for their practices. The current Soccer/Multi-Use Field at the park is used by all these organizations, and the outfield of the baseball field is often used as overflow when the field is full. She expressed it has been difficult to maintain the quality of the Soccer Field due to its excessive use.

Christy expressed that her biggest concern is not so much a new ball field, but more the proposed new buildings that will be put in place. Ron mentioned the building in the conceptual plan can change. Ron clarified a question that Christy asked, that the decisions

regarding the placement of the buildings are separate from the natural versus artificial turf decision, and can be decided later in the process.

John Weare stated that as a pediatrician for 40 years, he took care of many young people during illness and injury, including children and adolescents in athletic injuries. Since this concern was brought to the Committee two years ago, he has had plenty of time to investigate this subject and would like to specifically address the issue of safety with regards to natural versus artificial turf. Many studies have addressed soccer, football, field hockey and lacrosse played among adults. He presented a soccer cleat to the room for reference. He stated that it allows for enhanced grip of the artificial turf and increases risk of injury. He presented a baseball cleat used by the Coral Shores baseball team on natural grass. He then presented a shoe given to him by a mother of a current Coral Shores baseball player that her son uses when they play on artificial turf. This shoe has no cleats on the bottom. He stated that the risk of injury when using cleats is greater on artificial turf when playing sports like soccer, lacrosse, and field hockey when sudden turns are required. In his research, he does not believe that this statistic applies to baseball. His genuine heartfelt endorsement to the Committee and Council is that the artificial turf will be safer specifically for the youth playing baseball.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Carolyn specified that public comments will be limited to 3 minutes and should specifically address the issues of moving forward with this project or not, and whether natural or artificial grass is preferred.

Islamorada Resident and Baseball Field Task Force Committee member Jamie Engel clarified the question regarding where any unused money for this project will go, and if it will end up in Key West. She quoted Pat in the last meeting where he stated it will stay at Coral Shores and the upper keys. She said that the footprint will change when adding buildings, including an 800 square foot two-story concession stand and restroom building. The elevation should also be taken into consideration as they will be built upwards. 300 stadium seats will also be included. She asked if anyone has done a parking or traffic survey or questioned the positioning of the park signage regarding entrance fees for non-Islamorada residents that are currently in the baseball field parking lot. She also believes someone needs to do a cost analysis, because she feels that it seems this is the first time the Committee has heard about these cost details. She stated that the School District has signed an Athletic Field Maintenance Agreement with a company called Brightview Landscaping, to maintain all the athletic fields throughout the district from Key Largo to Key West beginning back in April 2025 through April 2029. The agreement requires Brightview to maintain the baseball field at Founders Park for 6 months out of the year, as well as maintain all the athletic fields throughout the county to a safe and up-kept condition. She asked that the Village consider hiring Brightview for the remainder of the year to make sure that whatever surface type is chosen, it is maintained properly. She stated that there has been an issue with maintenance in the past based on comments made by coaches,

umpires, athletic directors and parents at the June 24th meeting. Her biggest concern is what is going to be done to get the current field in shape for the 2026 Coral Shores baseball season, since it was expressed that the field is in bad condition and something needs to be done to create a safe field environment in the meantime before the new project begins. She believes a conversation between the School Board and the Village needs to happen now to prepare for this.

Islamorada Resident, Executive Director for the Florida Keys Environmental Coalition, community running coach and former elite runner Barry Ray stated that he has coached a lot in the area for the last 15 years, and much of it on grass surfaces at Coral Shores as well as Founders Park. He mentioned he has a master's degree in electrical engineering, double majored in mechanical engineering and has worked on construction projects all over the planet. When he hears comments about how natural grass doesn't work because of iguana damage, drainage issues, holes, etc., he believes that is all engineering related. He stated that of the 30 professional baseball fields, 25 of them are natural grass. There used to be 10 artificial turf fields, and 5 of those reverted to grass. The 5 remaining are in areas where they deal with weather conditions like extreme drought, and we do not have those conditions other than during the winter, although we have ways to address that. He stated that regarding those who expressed that the park should not be used by those outside of Islamorada, we have kids who play at Founders Park and don't understand the geography of the area, they just want to go out and have a good time and learn to play sports. He does not believe that bifurcating the people who use this park is not who we are as a community. He believes we do need to take more time to allow the Committee to make an educated decision, rather than shove it down their throats and force them to decide so quickly. His opinion is that we need to make this project work with grass, because if it is good enough for the pros, it is good enough for us, and we need to maintain it to that level. He does not want to have another plastic field on an island that is supposed to be representing green space and is an eco-centric draw for tourism.

Community Member Cheryl spoke in opposition to artificial turf. She expressed that many first-class fields around the country are natural grass. She stated that artificial turf costs less to maintain, but in the long term it's not as cost efficient, and water systems can also be put in place under natural grass. She expressed from experience that turf can cause season ending injuries, and it is painful to slide on.

Islamorada Resident and former Major League Baseball player, manager and coach Doug Mientkiewicz mentioned that no one has spoken about the dirt that goes along with the grass on the current field. He coached at Coral Shores for two years and has been coaching the Steady Bats program for almost 5 years. He asked if the people who are referencing Major League Baseball facilities understand that there is a significant cost for ground crews which can include 50-75 people per facility. Key West has had a turf baseball field since 2018 and replaces one section of the mound each year for \$900. His son blew out his knee playing at the field at Founders Park. He stated that during the season he needed to arrive

at 1:30pm to pour gallons of water on the infield in preparation for a 6:00pm game, to make it playable so that no child gets their teeth knocked out. He doesn't want the idea that having more kids on sports fields will make for less problems in the community to get lost in the shuffle of this discussion, because ultimately this is about the children. He stated that in his 45 years of playing and coaching experience, he has never seen an injury due to artificial turf. As far as maintenance of the current field, he mentioned that they do their best but there are only a couple maintenance workers, they cannot keep up with the field, and it would cost a lot of money to properly maintain the field to a higher standard with natural grass. He wants everyone to keep in mind that dirt is also involved with grass, and the field is for kids and multi-use activities.

25-year Islamorada Resident Joe Ziomek stated that Venetian Shores pays 15% of the ad valorem taxes of the Village of Islamorada. In any normal company, 15% would control the company. He asked attending Council members to respect the fact that they represent the Venetian Shores community. He believes the problem is the community is having to tell the Village Manager what to do, and it needs to be up to the community to influence the Council so that they can tell the Manager what to do. Ted respectfully disagreed, as the Council has asked the Committee to be a "focus group", although he believes the Council will ultimately do what they want to do and this subject may already be decided on, but they are asking for the Committee to give their input on artificial turf vs natural grass. Ted stated they are not doing it the wrong way. Joe reminded the Committee that the Village Manager does not make the decision, the Council does.

Islamorada Resident and Coral Shores Baseball Coach Tony Hammon stated that there are 250 kids playing little league baseball right now in the community. T-ball players have to play at Friendship Park in Key Largo. There is a little white trailer out by the baseball field that houses all the baseball equipment for Coral Shores, and the nearest bathroom is 350 feet away from the field, which is not practical. A young man on the team had purchased \$100+ baseball glove two years ago and left it in the locker room over the weekend. He came back to find that rats had eaten the glove. Public Works Director Andrew Engelmeyer, Fire Chief Terry Abel and Tony were able to extract the rats from the locker room and concession area, which has since been removed. Tony wants everyone to keep in mind that pitching speeds are much different than they were many years ago. He has a senior pitcher that was clocked at 95 mph and has committed to Florida State University next year. The speeds coming off the composite bats are over 100 mph, and he believes this is why artificial turf and a good playing surface are needed. He stated that the comments regarding resident-only use of the park were very upsetting to him and if that rule is going to be applied, it needs to be applied evenly across the board to all sports teams and people using the park in any way. He exclaimed that resident-only usage was not the intent of the park to begin with. In his 50 years of experience with baseball fields, he believes it would cost 1 million dollars a year to maintain a natural grass field properly, bringing sod and teams in for maintenance. It would take 4 acres minimum to put a baseball field in, which would not include swales, setbacks, etc. and there is no place that has that

kind of acreage here in Islamorada. Brightview does a great job, but they are not trained specifically in baseball field maintenance. They would need more help, more training and more financing to maintain fields properly. He also wanted to recognize that 5 million dollars would be left on the table if this project was walked away from. He also stated that Division 2 and NAIA fields are going back to artificial turf, but Division 1 and Major League fields can afford to put in natural grass fields and maintain them properly. New turf technology provides a padded underlayer and traction layers that show traction is better on this new artificial turf than on natural grass. He believes it would be terrible to remove the baseball field from Founders Park, due to the 50-year agreement made by the original Village Council.

Islamorada Resident and chairman of the IRS 501c3 Florida Keys Citizens Coalition spoke on the June 24th Baseball field discussion during the Founders Park Master Plan update. He stated it was the first televised and truly public report to the citizens of Islamorada in two years of the School Board's conceptual plan for the 6–7-million-dollar installation of artificial turf and commercial stadium offices and buildings on the baseball field area. He believes that this makes a mockery of past unkept promises that the public would be consulted and involved in every step of the way. He stated the School Board has already approved two sequential design contracts without consulting the Islamorada taxpayers. The current contract was authorized on February 11th with no Board discussion and no public comment allowed. He believes it was a rush decision to have the Village Council sign off on these controversies on the 22nd of July, after 4 years of secretive planning. This is only 12 days before the first briefing to this Committee. He presented the long expired original permit that states usage allowance is 2:30pm to dark Monday through Friday only, no weekends, for 19 weeks a year. He believes they have no entitlement to build a stadium complex they defaulted on building 24 years ago. He stated that there are many contradicting statements on the condition of the field currently, as Pat Lefere says it is not a “death trap”, although many other people have stated it is unsafe. He believes the field has been neglected because the decision has been made to turn the field to artificial turf. He referenced a comment at the June 24th workshop by Key West and School Board member Darren Horan stating that he expected cost overruns to increase and the Village should have to kick in as much as 2 million dollars to help fund just the initial cost overruns, with more expected in the future. Board Chair Mindy Conn has made similar public remarks. Ed stated that Pat neglected to mention the 2-million-dollar cost but did mention that Ron Saunders wants to get this signed in July, which Ed believes is a mistake. He asked Ron if the turf advocates insist that artificial turf is substantially safer for children, then he should have them sign a release and hold harmless against increased injuries which is a policy of many national organizations. The NFL players association agrees that all fields should go back to natural grass, from running and falling down injuries, not tackling injuries.

Islamorada Resident and Director of Concessions for Coral Shores Booster Jason Richards has had two of his own children student athletes go through the Coral Shores baseball

program. He stated that he and others in the community have spent a lot of time and hard working trying to get the baseball field to high school baseball playing standards, but it has been neglected for many years, and it takes a lot of money to maintain it to the level necessary for high school baseball. He stated that out of 32 NFL football teams, 17 of those teams have artificial turf at their facility. Each team gets a 290 million dollars salary cap, which means 32 teams get 8.9 billion dollars to play football. He asked the Committee to think about if these teams had all that money invested into the players, would they allow them to play on artificial turf if it was so unsafe as claimed? He stated that a thousand gallons of water in the Keys costs \$10.60. He has read studies that artificial turf can save anywhere from \$55,000 to \$90,000 per thousand feet of water a year. If natural grass is used, to maintain it you must mow it every two days. The field must be aerated and top dressed throughout the year. From his experience with the field, it takes 30 tons of top dressing per acre, and a 4.5-acre baseball field would take 150 tons of sand, which needs to be done twice a year. Aeration and Verti cutting are also needed. If the clay isn't kept at the right moisture, it will blow underneath the grass and create lips, which is very time consuming to remove. Artificial turf will save a lot on maintenance and will be much safer for players. Boston Red Sox spend anywhere from \$500,000 to a million dollars a year just to maintain their natural grass.

Islamorada Resident Sandi Bisceglia stated she is in support of Coral Shores students continuing to play baseball and sports at Founders Park, but she wanted to address that the Founders Park Master Plan survey stated that citizens did not want new buildings in the park, instead just renovations of existing amenities. She asked then why new multiple level stadium-type buildings are being proposed for Founders Park? She stated that at the June 24th School Board meeting, two board members including the Chair stated that they expected to "kick in" at least 2-million-dollars for the proposed sports complex at Founders Park because it is not their property and the cost of the project has increased. She thanked Ron Saunders for reigning that concept in. She stated that the School Board let the lease of the property expired and asked if it is fair to now rush to build this project. She stated that adjacent neighborhoods may be affected by PA system noise, traffic, water or chemical runoff, parking issues, etc. These neighborhoods would include Treasure Harbor, Plantation Lake States, Gimpy Gulch, Coral Road, East Ridge Road and Executive Bay areas, which represent hundreds of homeowners. She asked if any of the neighboring communities received official notice to attend a meeting regarding ballfield use expansion and possible impacts on their homes? Have there been safety studies regarding parking and runoff procedures? Is it proper that the public only has 12 days to respond to this expansive sports complex proposal?

Community member Carla Bahn stated that she finds it offensive that any adult would deny a child the ability to use the park facilities because their parents don't live in Islamorada and pay Islamorada taxes. She also stated that she is not an expert on artificial turf, but one of her sons is the coach of the Coral Shores Girls Lacrosse Team, and he can attest to the

fact that there have been more injuries to their players on natural grass fields. As coaches they would prefer artificial turf on all sporting fields. She does not expect the multi-use field to fit every need. She is not in favor of the locker room component, as she is not convinced it is necessary although it's a nice perk. However, if the 1600 square foot building is required to meet high school standards, she would ask that it could be configured to where it can have other uses during the off season, like refuge for summer camps, etc.

Chris Trentine expressed that the field has been in discussion for about 4 years, and it is much needed. He believes that artificial turf is the right way and should be approved.

Coral Shores Athletic Director Ed Holly stated that he is in favor of the multi-use field. He is a father with two sons that play college football, and they both play on artificial turf fields. He has zero problems with it.. He worried when his son played on natural turf in high school, because of negative stories he had heard. He is grateful that his son was given the opportunity to play baseball at Coral Shores. He also has a son that is a sophomore at Coral Shores and reminded the Committee that the decisions they make on this subject will directly affect him and all of the other children playing sports at Coral Shores. As the Athletic Director, he believes the proposed stadium project will bring so many more college coaches down to recruit athletes as a desired destination. He asked the Committee to think about the children and think about the future.

Islamorada Resident and parent Jenny Nopp stated she has a son who loves to play baseball. She mentioned there is limited field space throughout the Keys, and it is difficult to find places to practice. She is concerned about stalling of the project and would like to see the maintenance agreement decided upon so that the project can move forward instead of “going in circles for years”.

Doug mentioned that he brought the Minnesota Twins grounds crew down to the Coral Shores baseball field three years ago on his own dime to help him put in clay bricks and re-do the mound and plate. They are professionals who service the entire Lee County sports complex. He stated that they told him there is no way that two people can maintain this field properly and keep the mount and plate the way they serviced it.

John Weare reiterated that after two years of careful consideration and research, he sincerely believes that artificial turf will be the safer surface for the baseball field. He is not blindly endorsing artificial turf without careful consideration. He stated that during the Miller Legg Master Plan discussion, he had initially endorsed artificial turf for the soccer/lacrosse athletic field at Founders Park. However, after his research, he feels he can no longer endorse artificial turf specifically for soccer and lacrosse. He also discovered that artificial turf is hotter than natural grass, but he believes that will be more of a factor on a soccer field versus a baseball field, but there is no medical literature to support an increased risk of heat related illness when playing on artificial turf. He believes that the Committee owes to the community an endorsement to proceed with the project, and to endorse to the

Council that the project moves forward with artificial turf. Alina asked John to confirm that he would not endorse turf for the soccer and lacrosse field. He explained that he would remain neutral and not make a recommendation when it comes time to decide on phase 2 of the Master Plan, which includes proposing artificial turf on the soccer and lacrosse field. Alina explained that Maria mentioned that those sports groups would be using the outfield of the baseball field, which Alina believes would negatively impact those user groups due to safety concerns. John stated that those groups would be using the outfield in an informal fashion (for practices and drills only).

Richard Russell commented on concerns about where the 6.2 million dollars would go if it was not used for the baseball field improvement project. He stated that the money would essentially go towards the next project wherever it may be in the Keys. He also stated that the discussion that was had about the additional 2 million dollars was simply a discussion between the School Board Chair Mindy Conn and Darren Horan, and ultimately, they convened at a 5-0 unanimous vote to move forward with the original proposed costs. He reiterated that the agreement states the School Board is responsible for all expenses. He mentioned that the new water containment system will allow the water to be directed wherever they'd like it to go, as opposed to the current process that has issues with uncontrolled runoff. He also mentioned that baseball fields at universities cannot be compared to the field at Founders Park because those are dedicated fields that nobody else uses, they are not a public park being shared by other users. Lastly, he exclaimed that municipalities around the county are dealing with the same issues and questions that we are, and the artificial turf use has increased 400%, for the same reason that the paid consultants of Miller Legg came in and suggested artificial turf for our athletic fields. He agreed that pristine natural grass cannot be kept up with in the Keys due to the elements and obstacles presented.

David Epstein wants to make sure that Ron and others involved make sure we get our money from the School Board, and that he has the proper endorsement and approvals from the Committee so that he can move forward with the process. He believes this project will save the Village a ton of water and will create less algae and other runoff issues in the ocean. He believes the use of artificial turf in community back yards has increased significantly recently.

John introduced a motion to recommend that the Committee endorse the Village Council to proceed with the Founders Park Baseball Field renovation. Ted seconded the motion. Christy Hughes stated that she is in favor, but she is concerned that the large buildings will alter the nature of the park. She asked John if we would endorse what the School Board has approved. John clarified that's why he simply said to move forward, according to the interlocal agreement nothing can be done without the Village's agreement, but her concerns are valid and will be addressed separately. Carolyn explained that there are many variables to the project, but the Committee is only moving to move forward with an improvement project, and the variables will be addressed within the process. Ron confirmed that the

wording John used in his motion is accurate. Richard stated that there may still be adjustments to the interlocal agreement with some repurpose and possible modifications. Carolyn clarified that the cost of the project is not part of the Committee's conversation at this time. Alina asked if this decision is being made so that Council can "pound the gavel" on July 22nd. Ron expressed that it is not his intention to take this to the Council for final approval of the design plan, he primarily wants a decision to be made on artificial turf versus natural grass so that the project can move forward, and other negotiations can be made. The School Board approved a preliminary design plan, which could technically also be approved by Council, with a recognition that there will be many more meetings and plans could continue to change in the future. He stated that upon future discussions, opinions of the Committee, Council, and community members may change. Alina believes there needs to be more workshops for discussion. The motion made by John Weare was approved (7-1).

John moved that the Committee endorse to the Village Council the recommendation for the use of artificial turf in any new baseball field development that occurs. Natasha seconded the motion. The motion was approved (7-1).

FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS:
Founders Park Fee Schedule Discussion

ADJOURNMENT:

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman set the next regular meeting date as Thursday, August 21st, 2025 at 5:00pm. Carolyn made a motion to adjourn, John Weare seconded. The meeting ended at 8:08 P.M.

Recording Secretary,

Alicia Mote

Minutes Approved by Committee on
Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman _____.