

VERO BEACH RECREATION COMMISSION MINUTES
Tuesday, September 8, 2020 – 2:00 p.m.
City Hall, Council Chambers, Vero Beach, Florida

PRESENT: Chairman, Richard Yemm; Vice Chairman, Brooke Malone (via zoom); Members: Sue Dinunno (via zoom), and Judy Jones **Also Present:** Recreation Director, James O’Connell; Assistant Recreation Director, Patty Howard; City Attorney, John Turner and Senior Administrative Assistant, Rita Hawkins

Excused Absence: James “Rock” Tonkel

Unexcused Absence: Greg Holtan

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Yemm called today’s meeting to order at 2:06 p.m. and the Senior Administrative Assistant performed the roll call.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A) March 10, 2020

Mrs. Malone made a motion to approve the minutes of the March 10, 2020 Recreation Commission meeting. Ms. Jones seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

Mrs. Laura Moss, City Councilwoman, said that it came to the attention of the City Council that the Recreation Commission has not been meeting. As a Councilwoman, she requested that the Recreation Commission meet, because she believes it is important especially at this point in time. She believes that the Recreation Commission is one (1) of the most important Commissions. With the Coronavirus, people are encouraged to be outdoors more than ever before, which puts an increased emphasis on the recreational facilities. The City Council, the community, and the Steering Committee are in the midst of discussing the Three Corners property. She would be interested in hearing what the Recreation Commission has to say about the property. Right now, the property is zoned for recreational purposes and a lot of it will be dedicated to recreational purposes no matter what plan they choose. She suggested that in the future it might be helpful for the Recreation Commission to make recommendations on upgrades to the recreational facilities during the budget session. She encouraged the Recreation Commission to feel free to make recommendations on facilities that need work or even the programs. She knows they have reviewed the rates in years gone by. The Commission can always make recommendations on the rates as well and they do not need to wait on a request from the City Council. There might be programs that the City does not currently offer but might be able to offer at little or no cost. She hears that the Recreation Commission does not have any agenda items to discuss, but if there has ever been a time to call on the City Council, this is the time. She said that she appreciates their service and welcomes their ideas.

Mr. Yemm asked Councilwoman Moss when was she elected to the City Council.

Councilwoman Moss replied that it was 2016.

Mr. Yemm explained that in 2013-2014 the City Council requested that the Recreation Commission conduct a vetting of the Three Corners property. He said over six (6) months to a year they held public meetings of which they submitted a written response to the City Council with their recommendations from the people who participated. He believes there is a breakdown in the communication between the City Council and the Recreation Commission as far as deferring subject matters to the Recreation Commission. They used to receive several items from the City Council to discuss, but that has slowed and decreased over the last four (4) years. The Commission has the ability to generate responses. With five (5) voting members and two (2) alternate members, they can observe places and the facilities around the City and they can bring up items that need to be addressed at the Recreation Commission meetings. The problem is that items are not put on the agenda in order to notify the public to help get feedback on solutions. They should not have meetings to bring up ideas and vote on them, because they need public input. It is one (1) thing to point out a problem, but it is another thing to be able to suggest a solution to go with it.

Councilwoman Moss said she does not know if there was a plan for the Three Corners back in 2013 and what the Recreation Commission was responding to.

Mr. Yemm replied that there was no plan.

Councilwoman Moss stated now they have several plans and she recommends that they look at them since it is zoned for recreational use and recreation is highlighted in all of them. If there is something they need to bring to the City Council she recommends that they contact the City Clerk, who will get it on the agenda or a City Council member can sponsor them. We all work together and she wants to hear what the Recreation Commission has to say. She will sponsor the Recreation Commission and have it as an agenda item and go over any of the areas she mentioned.

Mr. Yemm said the difficulty is taking the concept of an idea and putting it into action.

Mr. Yemm stated that they can put the Three Corners plans on the October agenda and that way it will be advertised to the public. There have been multiple meetings with the Steering Committee and the City Council, but now it is time for the Recreation Commission to collect ideas and refine the concept that they are trying to develop.

Mrs. Malone said she has been on the Recreation Commission for about a year and a half and they have dealt with a handful of mountains they had to climb. There is so much going on right now with the Three Corners property and the new Recreation Director might not know much about what has been discussed. She knows they have been making announcements for new members on the Steering Committee. She believes they need to have a City Council member designate someone to the Steering Committee who truly represents recreation and no other interests. This might be a great opportunity for Mr. Jim O'Connell, Recreation Director, to get involved with this project to represent recreation and to get his hands involved with the community. There are very few areas in the City that they can protect for play space. The situation with the Three Corners project is that it has become very broad. She heard that a number of applications have come in from the community to serve on the Steering Committee so there are a lot of hands in the pot, but nobody represents recreation and she is not okay with that.

4. NEW BUSINESS

A) Introduction of the new Recreation Director, Mr. Jim O'Connell

Mr. Yemm said he has the pleasure to introduce the new Recreation Director, Mr. Jim O'Connell, who started with the City in March. Mr. Yemm read a brief account of Mr. O'Connell's background and work experience (on file in the City Clerk's office).

Mr. Jim O'Connell, Recreation Director, said he is very glad to be here. He said as soon as he came on board he was instructed to shut down all of the City's programs and facilities, so that was his first challenge. Over the past few months, they have gone through shutting down and reopening some of the facilities and their programs. He said his staff has done a wonderful job doing business and he thanked them. He is glad for the opportunity to be here and he looks forward to working with the Recreation Commission.

B) Review the Proposed Revised Riverside Tennis Fees

Mr. O'Connell said that he apologizes for stepping out of order and not bringing the proposed tennis rates to the Recreation Commission before taking them to the City Council. He stated the rate changes that are being proposed in the handouts were requested by City staff (on file in the City Clerk's office). He stated there are two (2) types of changes. The first change is the elimination of things that the City no longer offers and the others are adjustment to rates to make them more in line with other local facilities and to hopefully increase revenue. They are looking at changing the fees for the use of the ball machines, which are not getting a lot of use. If they lower the fees, he hopes they will get used more. They are also addressing their guest fees to make them more competitive as well as the monthly fees to make them a better option for the part time residents.

Mrs. Dinunno asked if this was presented to the City Council and is it a done deal.

Mr. O'Connell replied that it is not a done deal, but he did present it to the City Council and it will be on the next City Council's agenda pending the Recreation Commission's recommendations to continue with it.

Mrs. Dinunno asked if they are having trouble paying their way at Riverside Park. She knows that the Pickleball University has been pushing for Pickleball courts on the Island and that is an opportunity for income.

Mr. O'Connell said that might be a possibility, but it has not been proposed to him formally.

Mrs. Dinunno replied that they have asked several times, but maybe not in the last six (6) months. At one of the Recreation Commission meetings they filled the Council Chambers with Pickleball players. They were asking to have just a few courts at Riverside Park.

Mrs. Malone asked if the data that was used to make these changes was the same data they used originally to increase the rates. There are people who are using these courts seasonally, but in order to have access to courts on the Island they have to be members of an exclusive club or contribute nominally to a court system that is struggling financially. The reduction will not bring

more business. People were already using the courts and there was still a shortage except for the early morning sessions. The people who attended their meeting did not mind the increases and felt they were still competitive for the area. They were hoping it would generate income so they could pour some money into the facility and upgrade it. They also had interest from two (2) private entities that were looking to help by working out an agreement or help subsidize it. The Recreation Commission did not shift the rates this last time without some intense conversation from the community.

Mr. O'Connell reported that they have received some interest from the Marty Fish Foundation regarding them doing some programming at the facility. He is not sure if the original proposal is still on table, but he will be meeting with them again later this month to discuss a biweekly event at Riverside Park. The main impetus for him to propose the new fee structure came from City staff and input from the patrons using the facilities at this time.

Mrs. Malone said she understands that they are feeling an influx of changes. She would like to know what complaints he is receiving from staff and are they noticing a significant decrease in the number of people using the facility or are they tracking the number of people. These are the things they started looking at and started tracking last year. She would like to know if this rate decrease is based on that data or just a few people who have an issue with the changes.

Mr. O'Connell reported that the Tuesday night and Saturday morning groups that use to play at Riverside Park are no longer there mainly because of the fee structure. He proposed these changes based on staff telling him that the numbers are down and input from the patrons.

Mrs. Malone asked if he knows if these groups are going somewhere else, or did they just quit playing.

Mr. O'Connell replied that he does not know.

Mr. Yemm asked if the Riverside Racquet cost centers have been established.

Mrs. Howard replied no. She explained that they are not tracking the information to the same extent that they are at Leisure Square, but they are still tracking data.

Mr. Yemm asked if the software is in place to do the tracking.

Mrs. Howard replied they will be purchasing the equipment at the start of the fiscal year.

Mr. O'Connell explained that the Finance Department is tracking the daily financials for the tennis center, but they are not ready to meet with the Recreation Department to do a full cost center analysis.

Mr. Yemm said once that is in place they will be able to answer many of these questions.

Mrs. Malone replied that this is probably a poor time to look at the fee structure regardless of people's opinions. They know that the overall cost for recreation is going up. They are just starting to explore the cost centers, so they will basically be dismantling the Recreation Department and doing a reassessment. What they will get from this is a complete understanding of the

economics of what the space looks like. Since they do not have that information yet, it makes it hard for her to recommend these changes to the fee structures. Until they have some metrics to look at they are only making these decisions based on a few people's opinions.

Mr. Yemm asked what did these two (2) groups represent dollar wise and time wise in the use of the facility.

Mrs. Howard replied that the Tuesday and Saturday groups utilized the court for two (2) hours each time. She does not know how much revenue has been lost, but she can find out.

Mr. Yemm said these people must have had a membership, so they probably lost the membership costs as well as the court fees.

Mr. O'Connell replied that he believes they were using the guest fees for those groups.

Mr. Yemm asked if the guest fees are daily fees.

Mr. O'Connell replied yes. He explained that their guest fees are higher than other facilities. He said the City's facility does not match up with what they see at private facilities in terms of the state of the clubhouse, the courts, the fencing, restrooms, etc. It does not mean it is a bad facility, but they get what they pay for. He does not feel like the City is in a position to charge the same fees as a private facility when they do not offer similar amenities.

Mrs. Malone stated that she agrees with that, but they were already in that same financial slot and they were still struggling before the rate increases last year. She said if the City is not in a position to sustain it, they know there are foundations and people in the City that are eager to slap their nonprofit name on it. She feels like the decision to increase the rates was not based on just making more money. She said they wanted to find out who their customer base was and to market to them and create a nicer space that they would want to use.

Mr. Yemm said that access to the school's courts are no longer open to the public, so people are limited to what they have access to use. From a marketing standpoint, they need to know the value when establishing the cost of providing these services. In his opinion, recreation provided by the City is a limited service and they should not be trying to compete with private clubs. The question is how much does the City want to spend on the quality of the environment and the facilities.

Mrs. Malone said they are not here to discuss and debate whether they should or should not have increased the rates. The fact is that they voted to make the changes based on the data they had. Now they are discussing making changes again within six (6) months of having a new Recreation Director and dealing with the Coronavirus, which has skewed the figures. They voted on the new fees and they knew they were going to get some pushback.

Mr. Yemm asked Mrs. Howard what were the fees before they increased them.

Mrs. Howard replied that she does not know at this moment.

Mrs. Malone stated that these figures are very close, so they are going back to where they started. She said most of the significant changes they previously made were not for tennis, but they were in relation to the rentals of public Park spaces, which is producing some income.

Mr. Yemm stated that there are two (2) ways to address these proposed rate changes. They can either table it and do some more research, or they can vote on it.

Mrs. Dinunno stated that the Pickleball University members are very interested in coming to Riverside Park. This group has numerous members that live on the Island who have to drive to Pocahontas Park, but Pocahontas Park is under stress due to the amount of people who play there. The Pickleball group would be happy to discuss a lease for half of the courts at Riverside Park.

Mrs. Malone said her recommendation is that it is not the time to make a decision and they need to look at some specific data.

Mrs. Dinunno suggested that they also seek any interest from the community, especially Pickleball University, who might be able to take some of the financial stress off the Recreation Department.

Mr. Yemm said tabling this item is the direction they should go in until they can get some more data.

Mrs. Dinunno said she believes that the Coronavirus is to blame for the problems they are experiencing and it is not just a lack of money from people on the beachside.

Mrs. Malone said she agrees. She said people are spending more than ever on recreation.

Mr. Yemm said he is in favor of tabling this and bringing it back after the first of the year. He asked if there were any objections to tabling this item. There were no objections from the Commission members.

C) The Conducting of Future Meetings – Mrs. Tammy Bursick, City Clerk

Mrs. Tammy Bursick, City Clerk, explained that in March the Florida Governor passed an executive order to allow meetings to take place via Zoom or Go to Meeting because of the Coronavirus. The City has been doing this for the last couple of months. In the beginning they did not have the ability to conduct these virtual meetings from the Council Chambers, but now they have the equipment and they are still working on it. Most of the City's Boards and Commissions are meeting again on a regular basis. She said at last Tuesday's City Council meeting, Councilwoman Moss asked the Recreation Commission to submit any items they would like to discuss at their future meetings. Mrs. Bursick said she received a couple of responses from the Commission members. The first response was from Mrs. Malone who said she would like to hear the short-term and long-term goals of the new Recreation Director.

Mr. John Turner, City Attorney, said in regards to Mr. Yemm's motion to table the rate changes until more data is collected, he is not sure if that was the correct way to handle it since this is an Advisory Commission. Perhaps they should reconsider and make a recommendation to the City Council that this matter be postponed until a specific date, so that staff can find that information

and present it back to the Recreation Commission in the proper fashion. If they want to specify the first of the year that would be sufficient.

Mrs. Dinunno stated that they will be doing rate reviews sometime in December, so this might give the community the opportunity to present proposals.

Mrs. Malone said this will also give the cost centers an opportunity to contribute some numbers for them to look at. She agrees that they make this recommend to the City Council to delay this decision and that the first of the year should give them ample time. She would recommend that they turn in what information they currently have and combine it with what information they can clean out of the cost centers.

Mrs. Dinunno said they should also issue a statement to the public indicating that they are open to proposals.

Mr. Yemm asked Mr. O'Connell how much time will he need to gather this data.

Mr. O'Connell replied that he would need to work with the Finance Department on that, but he thinks January would be workable.

Mr. Yemm said they now established that January is a good date. The other important part of this is the availability of the public to participate in the discussion and expanding it beyond just the members of the Recreation Commission. They will need feedback from both the tennis community and the Pickleball group.

Mrs. Bursick stated that the date of the January Recreation Commission meeting will be January 12, 2021.

Mr. Turner said the motion is to continue this discussion at the January 12, 2021 Recreation Commission meeting to allow staff to accumulate the data and have it on the agenda for consideration so they can make a recommendation to the City Council.

Mr. Yemm asked for a roll call vote.

On a roll call vote the motion passed unanimously 4-0 with Ms. Jones voting yes, Mrs. Dinunno yes, Mrs. Malone yes, and Mr. Yemm yes.

Mrs. Howard stated that the Recreation Department has a great partnership between the Riverside Racquet complex and St. Edward's School. The school uses the tennis courts for practice and their tournaments and in turn, the Recreation Department uses the St. Edwards facility for their annual Aerial Antics Circus.

Mr. O'Connell stated that his short-term goals upon arriving here was to get to know the Recreation Department, the City Staff, and the City. However, his short-term goal became dealing with the Coronavirus, which shut everything down on his second day on the job. His staff did a wonderful job dealing with it. His short-term goal now is to get back to normal. He said his first impression of the City's recreation facilities was that they were in bad shape. The tennis center, Leisure Square, the Community Center, and the lifeguard stands are all in need of repair or replacement.

His long-term goal is to address the upgrading of the City recreational facilities to bring them to a level of what the City deserves.

Mrs. Malone said that is refreshing to hear.

Mr. O'Connell said he has worked in other places and it is always hard to keep the recreation facilities up to the standards they want. Recreation is always down the list for funding. There are some great aspects of the City like the beaches and Riverside Park and there are also some good facilities, but they just need some love. The City is doing good things, but they need to upgrade the facilities and they are starting to do that. The 5-year capital plan includes numerous upgrades and he hopes they can accelerate some of the projects.

Mrs. Malone asked Mr. O'Connell what his thoughts was after looking at the 5-year capital plan.

Mr. O'Connell replied that the budget has not been adopted yet and most projects were already in the budget when he arrived. Unfortunately, a couple of the projects have already been delayed. He said it is one (1) thing to put an item in the budget, but trying to get the City Council to let them move forward with it is another task.

Mrs. Bursick stated that the second email was from Mrs. Sue Dinunno. She would like to know what the chances are of being able to conduct events in 2021.

Mrs. Dinunno announced that the Vero Beach Art Club has started planning for the 2021 Under the Oaks Art Festival. Last year they had people here from all over the United States and they were shut down on the first day of their art show. They City did not shut down Riverside Theater and those people were in doors and shoulder to shoulder. The Art Club gave the participants two thirds of their cost back as a credit towards next year's show, so that means the Art Club lost two thirds of their income in 2020. She said it was embarrassing, so before they go through this again they would like to know that all of the events will be treated fairly.

Mr. O'Connell said he cannot speak on that event, because it was before he arrived here. When he was leaving Peachtree City, Georgia, they were going through the same situation with an event. He said he has been a proponent for reopening the City whether it is the playgrounds, the facilities, the community events, but especially the outdoor events. A lot of this is clearly out of their control, but seeing how things look now and the event is several months away, he would be optimistic that they should be able to hold their event.

Mr. O'Connell stated that the Governor's order is due to expire on October 1st. They are hoping there will not be another extension and they can get back to normal.

Mrs. Howard explained that right now they are only authorized to approve outdoor events for parties of 50 or less. They have not been able to hold any indoor events, so they cannot rent the Riverhouse, Bethel Creak House, or the Community Center. They have started taking tentative reservations for dates after October 1st.

Mr. Yemm said this is all up in the air, because if the virus comes back again combined with the flu, events could be restricted again.

5. OLD BUSINESS

None

6. RECREATION DIRECTOR'S MATTERS

Mr. O'Connell thanked the Commission for being here and for welcoming him. The staff has done a great job through this crisis. They managed to have summer camp this year, they opened the facilities on a limited basis, and the tennis facility was closed down and then reopened. It was all done by the great work of the staff and he would like to commend them.

7. CHAIRMAN'S MATTERS

None

8. MEMBER'S MATTERS

Mrs. Malone stated that she received a handful of emails and text messages over the last few weeks that she will categorize them so they can be discussed. When she is back in town, she will reach out to Mr. O'Connell if he is open to participate in the Three Corners property. There are a handful of organizations and individuals in this town that are very interested in what is going on with the Three Corners project and the recreational properties that he is responsible for. She would like to see how they can get these groups, volunteers, and organizations involved with the Recreation Commission so that we can help them find space for their activities.

Mr. O'Connell said he would be open to working with them.

Ms. Jones stated that her personal interest is and always will be supporting the Junior Staff members. She is sorry they could not have the Junior Staff recognition breakfast this summer.

Mr. Yemm said there is a big difference in how private business and public meetings are held. There are restrictions to holding public meetings because of the Sunshine Law. One key difference to holding public meetings is putting together an agenda and getting it out to the public to get their participation. If they want public input for their October meeting when they discuss the Three Corners property, he suggested they put together a survey of 10 to 15 questions to find out what the public wants from the Recreation Department.

Mrs. Malone said she would like to get feedback on the Three Corners project from the public, but the City already spent a huge amount of money for a company to do a survey, so they already have that information. They discovered that there is an overwhelming interest in recreational spaces. They know they have recreational spaces and the ability to maintain them, but they do not have representation at the meetings. It would be nice to work together with the community on this project. The Recreation Commission might need to make some serious decisions that they can present to the City Council.

Mrs. Dinunno asked if the Recreation Commission's agenda is on the City's website. Does the public know what they are going to be discussing.

Mrs. Malone replied yes it is public information. It is on the calendar on the City's website.

Mrs. Malone excused herself from the meeting at 3:32 p.m.

Councilwoman Moss said that she will put the Recreation Commission under new business on the City Council agenda and she will attach some backup materials. Maybe this will get the community thinking about recreation and raise awareness among people who are interested.

Mrs. Dinunno asked if the Recreation Commission is working with a full board, or are they short a couple of members.

Mrs. Bursick replied that there is one (1) Alternate position open. She just received an application today from an individual who is interested in serving on the Recreation Commission, so she will be taking it to the City Council.

9. NEXT MEETING DATE

A) October 13, 2020

The next Recreation Commission meeting is scheduled for October 13, 2020 at 2:00 p.m.

10. ADJOURNMENT

Today's meeting adjourned at 3:34 p.m.

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