Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission

MINUTES OF MEETING

Date: November 14, 2023

Time: 2:00 p.m.

Location: Pierce Lake Golf Course, 1175 S. Main Street, Chelsea, MI 48118

Members Present: Patricia Scribner, WCPARC President; Janis Bobrin, Vice President; Dan Ezekiel, WCPARC Secretary, Robert Joerg, Robert Marans, JoAnn McCollum, Evan Pratt, Yousef Rabhi, and Katie Scott

Members Absent: Brenda McKinney

Staff Present: Coy Vaughn, Director; Meghan Bonfiglio, Deputy Director; Jason Brooks, Manager of Finance and Administration; Ann Ziolkowski, Communications Manager; Brian Klender, Superintendent of Pierce Lake Golf Course; Dan Cooperrider, Park & Facility Supervisor; Peter Sanderson, Project Manager; David Ries, Project Manager; Kira Macyda, Park Planner; and Roy Townsend.

Others Present: Greg Dill, County Administrator; Andrew DeLeeuw, Deputy County Administrator; Brady Peck, Director of Operations; Caroline Sanders, Board of Commissioners; Shery Siddall, Director of WCRC; Matt MacDonell, Managing Director of WCRC; Barb Fuller, WCRC Commissioner; Rodrick Green, WCRC Commissioner; Jeffrey Smrz, WCRC Commissioner

1. Call to Order

Ms. Scribner called the meeting to order at 2:01 p.m.

2. Pledge of Allegiance

3. Joint Session with the Washtenaw County Road Commission (WCRC): Revenue Whitepaper Discussion

Mr. Dill, County Administrator, presented the County Revenue White Paper that was prepared for the Board of Commissioners (BOC) on October 18, 2023. He explained that the White Paper was not a proposal but meant to inform the BOC of potential options for mitigating revenue shortfalls. He explained that the Headlee Amendment has suppressed total taxing authority and resulted in reduced revenues for the County. The BOC has many unfunded priorities that could be addressed with extra revenue. Mr. Dill explained that one option is shifting County millages to a General Operating Millages to allow more flexibility and could also include a Headlee Override Restoration. He added that General Fund dollars are versatile and generally not restricted which would allow flexibility in funding various priorities. The goal is to consider all revenue streams and expenditures to make sure the BOC has the resources available to address the needs of the community.

Mr. Dill went on to explain the details of the White Paper and some of the unfunded BOC priorities, including housing, climate action, infrastructure, animal control, violence intervention, transportation, and the uninsured in the community. We also have to consider the millage limitations which we are getting close to the 50-mill limit.

Mr. Vaughn pointed out that the Headlee override has been addressed recently on two separate millages by doing a “renew and restore”. He asked if continuing this practice was sufficient for this goal without the need to combine millages into a General Operating millage. Mr. Dill agreed that this has been successful. He added that he has not heard talk of eliminating the Parks or Roads Millage and that is not a recommendation from his office. However, he has heard some concern that some targeted millages are not being used in ways that the BOC and voters intended.

Ms. Bobrin asked for clarification on the comment about some of the targeted millages not being used appropriately. Mr. Dill responded that this was a concern voiced by a County Commissioner and he would rather not speak on their behalf. He added that from his lens, maximum flexibility in how millage revenue is used is the key.

Ms. Siddall asked when there will be action taken by the BOC to get the Roads and Trail Millage on the ballot. She added that if this millage is not being considered to be replaced by a General Operating Millage, when can we expect this to happen soon so WCRC and WCPARC staff can start the public outreach work? Mr. Dill explained that the BOC first priority is to pass the budget. Realistically, he didn’t believe that the BOC would be able to take action yet this year but likely by the 2nd meeting in January.

Ms. Fuller stated that she is most interested in clear and direct response on the timing of approving the ballot language for the Road and Trail Millage that was approved by the WCRC on October 5th. This millage has been renewed twice by voters with over 70% approval rate and she doesn’t understand why it is being held up. Mr. Dill responded that he does not set the board agenda, but he will make sure that board leadership and the board chair understand your concerns regarding timing.

Mr. Green asked how the shortfall was handled in the past. Mr. Dill explained that it is not a budget shortfall and that the BOC has passed a balanced budget and is able to operate on the thinnest of margins. The shortfall is not having the revenue to address new and emerging BOC priorities.

Mr. Pratt said that it sounds like everyone was looking for an affirmative response that these millages would not be rolled into a larger County Operating Millage. Both WCPARC and WCRC are responsible for delivering important services to the community and we would like to move forward with confidence that we have the resources to do so. Mr. Dill responded that he does not have the authority to answer these questions. Our nine elected officials must have time to consider options in move forward in a way that best serves the community.

Mr. Rabhi stated that, speaking as 1 of 9 Commissioners, he has no interest in undoing the successful WCPARC or WCRC millages nor has he heard this from other Commissioners. He stated his support for getting the Road and Trail Millage on an agenda ASAP. Mr. Rabhi also was thankful for the work of Mr. Dill and his team to develop the White Paper so the BOC understands the total picture and can make informed decisions.

Mr. Dill reiterated that he will make sure that the topic is on the agenda of the next board leadership meeting. He thanked WCPARC and WCRC for inviting him to the meeting but had to leave for another meeting and stated that Andrew DeLeeuw, his Deputy, would finish answering questions.

Mr. Vaughn noted his concern with the reference to “excess funds” in the fund balance of some Departments. He explained that although it may appear that WCPARC has a large fund balance, the funds are encumbered and dedicated to important community projects such as the Eastside Rec Center, the B2B, and Staebler Farm.

Mr. Joerg stated that the White Paper seems to be written with some bias towards one solution of a County Operating Millage. He asked for clarification that if a single County Operating Millage were to come to fruition, would all WCPARC and WCRC funding be at the discretion of the BOC. He added that we trust the current BOC but you never know what future could hold.

Mr. Ezekiel thanked Mr. Dill and his team for attending and answering the tough questions. He added that WCPARC and WCRC represent the BOC well and we do a good job of taking care of our business, so people are not showing up at BOC meeting to complain about Parks and Roads.

Ms. Bobrin added that the residents of the County vote for resources to be used for specific things, such and parks and roads. She added that the public would likely not be in favor of voting on a millage that is a "black box" where the funds can be used for anything at the whim of elected officials or staff.

Mr. DeLeeuw offered to make the suggested changes to the White Paper and committed to working with his team to address these concerns. He thanked both Commissions for the opportunity to be on the agenda today.

4. Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the October 10, 2023, regular meeting were included with the agenda material.

It was moved by Ms. Scott seconded by Ms. McCollum, to approve the minutes of the October 10, 2023; regular meeting as amended. All ayes, the motion was approved.

5. Public Comment

None.

6. Communications, Projects & Activities

Mr. Vaughn reported on the communications, projects, and activities for the month of October 2023. He announced the upcoming retirement of Dan Cooperrider from Pierce Lake Golf Course and thanked him for his many years of exemplary service. Brian Klender gave an overview of golf course operations and highlights from the 2023 golf season. He also thanked Mr. Cooperrider for his hard work and leadership.

It was moved by Mr. Marans, seconded by Ms. McCollum, to receive and file the Communications, Projects & Activities for the month of October 2023, as submitted. All ayes, the motion was approved.

7. Consent Agenda

A. Parks Millage Renewal Resolution
B. Wetland Mitigation – M-52 B2B Trail Project
C. Underwood Trust Distribution
D. Phase III – Rolling Hills Concessions Project
E. B2B – Engineering Services: Barton Dam to Maple Road
F. Title IX Plaza Award

It was moved by Mr. Rabhi, seconded by Mr. Marans, to approve the consent agenda as submitted. Roll call vote, 9 ayes, 0 nays, 1 absent (McKinney), the motion was approved.

8. Financial & Recreation Reports – October 2023

A. Claims Report

Mr. Brooks reported on the financials and stated that the total for the claims for the month of October 2023 was $761,666.40.

It was moved by Ms. Bobrin, seconded by Mr. Rabhi, to approve the claims for the month of October 2023 as submitted. Roll call vote, 9 ayes, 0 nays, 1 absent (McKinney), the motion was approved.

B. Fund Balance Reports

Mr. Brooks provided an update on the Parks fund and Natural Areas Funds along with the fund balance status for each through October 31, 2023.

It was moved by Mr. Joerg, seconded by Mr. Ezekiel, to receive and file the financial reports for October 2023 as submitted. All ayes, 1 absent (McKinney), the motion was approved.

C. Recreation Reports

Mr. Brooks presented the Recreation Reports for the month of October 2023. He also provided a comparison of revenue vs. expenditures for all facilities. He pointed out that across all facilities there is approximately a $2M subsidy of WCPARC operating costs.

It was moved by Mr. Marans, seconded by Ms. Scott, to receive and file the Recreation Reports for the month of September 2023. All ayes, 1 absent (McKinney), the motion was approved.

9. *Old Business*

A. NAPP – Haynes Property Final Approval

Ms. Kreuger presented the recommendation to purchase the Haynes Property located in Northfield Township. The 11.75-acre Hayes property was originally nominated in round 12 and is adjacent to the Whitmore Lake Preserve. The site includes a diverse landscape featuring upland woods, open fields, a significant portion of Lawton Lake and extensive wetlands.

In May 2023, the Parks Commission approved a sales contract in the amount of $110,000 based on the appraised value. The sales contract was contingent upon completion of due diligence, which has since been completed.

Mr. Rabhi commented that he was thrilled to see this high-quality property protected and that this will be an excellent addition to the Whitmore Lake Preserve. Mr. Ezekiel agreed and talked about a Sierra Club hike to this property.

It was moved by Mr. Ezekiel, seconded by Mr. Rabhi, to authorize the fee simple purchase of the Haynes property in the amount of $110,000, contingent upon attorney review of final closing documents, and that $6,000 be contributed to the stewardship special revenue fund for the future maintenance and management of the land. Roll call vote, 9 ayes, 0 nays, 1 absent (McKinney), the motion was approved.

B. Connecting Communities Project Awards

Kira Macyda explained that the 2023 Round of CC grants were announced with a deadline of August 31. Four grant proposals were submitted from the following communities: Ann Arbor Township, Pittsfield Township, Scio Township and York Township. In 2023, planning/engineering funding requests totaled $71,000 and construction funding requests totaled $800,000.

Mr. Joerg asked how the Connecting Communities program was funded. Mr. Vaughn explained that the program is supported by the Road and Trails millage.

Mr. Rabhi asked if there are any requirements for responsible contractor provisions for construction projects under this program. Mr. Vaughn answered that the projects are all awarded and administered by the local unit of government, so it varies.

Mr. Pratt commented that WATS is interested in the program and would benefit from a presentation.

Ms. Macyda explained that all projects were reviewed and scored by the staff and the following funding recommendations were made:

Ann Arbor Township - $250,000 for construction
Pittsfield Township - $250,000 for construction
York Township - $71,000 for planning and design

It was moved by Mr. Marans, seconded by Ms. Bobrin, to authorize staff to prepare project agreements and to award grant funding as recommended. Roll call vote, 9 ayes, 0 nays, 1 absent (McKinney), the motion was approved.

C. Other Old Business

None.

10. New Business

A. Meri Lou Murray Recreation Center Fee Modifications

Ms. Carr presented a proposal to increase fees at the MLM Rec Center beginning January 1, 2024. She explained that WCPARC maintains rates at the most affordable levels possible. However, periodically, the Commission adjusts fees at facilities to stay in keeping with industry trends and changes in the local market. The last fee modifications were done in 2022, nine years after the previous rate increase in 2013. Staff researched competitor fees and proposed a 10% increase for resident memberships and a 15% increase for non-residents. A 15% increase for class fees was also recommended.

Mr. Joerg pointed out that the revenue gap relative to expenditures has expanded since the pandemic. He asked staff why this was the case. Ms. Bonfiglio explained that this was a trend across the industry for many indoor facilities. Many patrons have found other exercise and fitness alternatives including investing in home equipment. Also, there are many fixed costs associated with operating a rec center that do not decline when the number of patrons decline. For numerous reasons, indoor facilities have been slower to rebound.

Mr. Joerg said that he voted against fee increases last time and may do the same this time. He is sympathetic to the tight budgets and record inflation for County residents.

Mr. Ezekiel responded that it is not the job of staff to address economic woes, but if there is a need in the community it should be addressed.

Mr. Rabhi stated that he was not a big fan of providing scholarships but there should be a way to lower rates for those that receive Medicaid or food assistance. Perhaps we should amend the motion to create a subcommittee to explore the issue of affordability and report back in 6-months. He added that we should be looking at all revenue streams and not only rates. Mr. Marans accepted the friendly amendment to his original motion.

Ms. Scott explained that her primary concern is raising rates for seniors that are on a fixed income. Mr. Ezekiel responded that most seniors, especially the demographic at MLM, are not as needy as most of our younger population. Ms. Bobrin agreed.

Mr. Joerg requested a working session, in addition to the subcommittee, where we can focus on appropriate fees for all facilities.

It was moved by Mr. Marans, seconded by Mr. Pratt, to authorize staff to execute the proposed membership and class fee increases effective January 1, 2024, and to establish a subcommittee to explore fee structures and recommendations for future increases within the next 6 months. All ayes, 1 absent (McKinney), the motion was approved.

B. Other New Business

None.

11. Commissioners / Directors Comments

None.

12. Adjournment

It was moved by Mr. Marans, seconded by Ms. Scott, to adjourn. All ayes, the motion was approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:53 PM.