

SUMMARY MINUTES

ISLAMORADA, VILLAGE OF ISLANDS PARKS & RECREATION CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, November 15, 2023
Meeting started at 4:00 p.m. at the Founders Park Community Center

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

PRESENT:

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

ABSENT:

Christy Hughes, justified.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman asked Maria Bagiotti to lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

INTRODUCTIONS AND ORIENTATION:

Natasha Early introduced herself as a longtime resident of Islamorada, and a Realtor with Ocean Sotheby's. She has two young boys and frequents Founders Park often, which inspired her to become involved with the Committee. Joseph (Joe) Jannach introduced himself as a longtime Islamorada resident along with his wife. He is a retired contractor/builder and spends a lot of his time using the facilities at Founders Park. Eduardo (Eddy) Suarez is a recently retired Postmaster of Key Largo and currently lives in Islamorada. He is passionate about Monroe County and feels he can make a difference. John Weare introduced himself as a retired pediatrician and 16-year resident of Islamorada, living right next door to Founders Park. He uses the park almost daily and is very familiar with park usage. Carolyn Wightman introduced herself as a longtime Islamorada resident, living just across the street from Founders Park. She stated she has been involved with the park since the beginning, as well as involved with swimming, summer and soccer programs and considers the park to be the Crown Jewel of Islamorada. Alina Davis introduced herself as a resident of the Village since 1993, before its incorporation. She saw the formation of Founders Park and decided to become involved when the Committee was first established. She agrees with Carolyn that the park is the Crown Jewel of Islamorada. She is also a Realtor with Coldwell Banker Schmitt. Shannon Cary introduced herself as a resident of Islamorada since 2013 and moved here as a military family. She has four children ages 11 to 20 years old. Her family uses the park all the time, between tennis and soccer. She is currently the Director of the Florida Keys Soccer Club. Richard Russell introduced himself as a 45+ year Islamorada resident and a teacher, coach, and administrator at Coral Shores High School. He is very appreciative of the relationship that he and the high school have created with Maria and Founders Park over the years.

Maria Bagiotti introduced herself as the Director of Founders Park and has also been working for the Parks and Recreation Department for the past 23 years.

Annie Onsgard introduced herself as the Park and Program Manager at Founders Park, and a long time Florida Keys resident, graduating from Coral Shores High School. She has worked for the Parks and Recreation Department since 2005.

David Epstein introduced himself as an Islamorada resident living across the street from Founders Park. He was taught by Richard Russell at Coral Shores High School and spent 30 years in the Air Force.

Alicia Mote introduced herself as the Park Office Coordinator, living in Islamorada full time and working in the Parks and Recreation Department for 6 years.

Staff provided Committee members with an orientation document outlining the Parks and Recreation Citizen's Advisory Committee's Mission Statement and goals and functions.

COMMITTEE CHAIR ELECTIONS: Richard Russell made a motion to nominate Carolyn Wightman to continue as the Committee Chairperson. Shannon Cary seconded the motion and the motion passed unanimously (9-0). Carolyn Wightman made a motion to nominate Richard Russell as the Vice Chairperson. John Weare seconded the motion, and the motion passed unanimously (9-0).

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

John Weare moved to table the approval of minutes from April 18th, 2023 until next meeting due to discrepancies in the terms used when the Coral Shores Baseball Field improvements were initially discussed. He also moved to approve the minutes from June 13, 2023. Alina seconded the motions; the motions was approved unanimously. (10-0)

Ted Benbow arrived late, and introduced himself as a long time Islamorada resident and fishing guide and runs the Marlin store in town. He also owns a manufacturing plant with his brother in Ohio. He believes that Founders Park is the Crown Jewel of Islamorada.

EMERGENCY AGENDA ADDITIONS OR DELETIONS: Richard Russell stated he informed Maria that he would like to remove the update on the Coral Shores High School Baseball Field Improvements at Founders Park from the agenda. He attended a Monroe County School Board meeting on Tuesday, November 14th and Richard expressed that he is not sure he can appropriately articulate the decisions made and items discussed. He stated that this meeting will be public knowledge and published in the newspaper and online. Carolyn clarified that in her understanding, the conversation will include decisions on the proposed revisions of the field and the agreement between Founders Park and Coral Shores regarding property ownership and field maintenance. She asked Richard if it was appropriate to say that there is no decision to be made on the park side currently. Richard agreed.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Captain Ed Davidson, a long-time Islamorada resident, stated that the baseball field was originally a lease agreement between the Village and the School Board made back in 2001, with an amendment made in 2008. He also stated that there are 89 native trees surrounding

the baseball field area. He presented the winning bid layout of the proposed new field and stated that this proposed layout will require the removal of 30 surrounding native trees. He requested in writing that the School Board and the Village demand that the contractor plot the location of all the trees that would possibly be affected. He stated that they are planning to bulldoze the area and install a complex drainage system as well as place astroturf over the entire area. He expressed concerns about astroturf, including chemicals, plastics, and toxins. He mentioned that the water will drain hundreds of feet away from the area and the 89 trees will be in peril. He also expressed concern about the astroturf because the NFL has had many injured players on astroturf fields, and he mentioned that the NFL players association has officially issued a national policy that all fields be returned to natural grass. He stated that major and international soccer teams don't play on turf because of injuries. He stated that turf manufacturers are in a lawsuit because they claimed they have been using recycled materials when in fact they have not been, as there are only two recycling plants on the planet, and they are in European countries.

Carolyn asked to summarize for clarity, and stated she understands there was a decision made by the School Board that the Committee is unaware of, that involved incomplete contractual agreements, and that Captain Ed has concerns about the turf and materials used to make it. Captain Ed agreed and also added his concern for the trees. He also reiterated his concern about the drainage and neglect of the trees, which Carolyn confirmed is his fourth concern. He expressed concern about the new proposed field affecting the residents who live across the street from the park. Alina asked for clarification if the trees that were meant for mitigation had to be planted. He expressed that they were supposed to be, but he was laughed at when he asked the Director of the School District if he had any evidence that had ever occurred. Ted stated that he believes there are a lot more trees up in that area lining US-1 than there used to be, as he remembers it used to be a wide-open area.

Carolyn summarized Captain Ed's comments as questions and concerns about the following: Questions about the original contract with the Village and who has authorization to make decisions, questions about the drainage system and where the water will go, questions and concerns about the surrounding trees and their preservation, questions about the use of artificial turf versus natural turf, questions about the design and how complete the proposed layout is, questions regarding fencing, whether it will be a locked facility during certain times of the year, and questions about who will be paying for the project. Captain Ed explained that the Committee members should be the guardians of the park and along with community members, and should not let things like this go unnoticed or unaddressed. Richard encouraged Committee members to view last night's School Board meeting on their website, where a lot of these concerns and questions were addressed and clarified. Richard also mentioned that natural grass would be preferred, but it seems that maintenance and water consumption can become costly financially and environmentally. Carolyn mentioned it may be helpful for staff to do some homework on the subject and if necessary, the Committee may need to hold a Special Call meeting in the future for more discussion. John stated that he believes it is too early in the process for the Committee to

make any definitive statements. Maria asked Richard if there is a website where the School Board meeting could be viewed. He stated that it can be watched on www.keysschools.com. Natasha mentioned that she will share the link with staff if she's able to find it on the website.

Sandi Bisceglia, a long-time Islamorada resident, educator, and former Plantation Key School principal thanked Committee members for volunteering and giving their time to helping. She also thanked Maria and park staff for being very professional and accommodating to meet with her regarding any questions or concerns she may have. She mentioned she has spoken to the Committee in the past about drone usage, holiday lighting affecting the trees in the park, and most recently about the proposed Pickleball court expansion affecting the parking areas and nearby facilities. She stated that she feels the Baseball Field Improvement Project is much more than an improvement, and she is concerned that there hasn't been a lot of oversight, strategic planning or advisement from various groups proactively by the school system or the Village, and this has been in discussion for two years. She is concerned that she feels like not a lot of people know much about this project. She congratulated the Committee for putting Strategic Planning on the agenda and appreciates that the minutes are now available on the Village website.

PARKS AND RECREATION DIRECTOR'S REPORT:

Maria narrated a Parks and Recreation Department Overview presentation, to give Committee members insight into the work staff does at the park every day. The presentation included the department's goals, services, facilities and amenities, programs, and staff positions and responsibilities. Annie presented further on programs, including youth programs, summer camps, senior programs, adult sports leagues, lifeguard certification courses, contracted programs and services, outside organizations that use the facilities, departmental events and events that are held in the park. Maria presented information on the Capital Projects that are in the budget this year, including Solar Light Replacement, ADA Inclusive Beach Playground, Splash Pad Resurfacing, Pool Resurfacing Project, Great Lawn Electric and Lighting, Additional Pickleball Courts, and a possible Resident Entrance. Annie mentioned the Islamorada Youth Council and their function and responsibilities. Maria also mentioned the other passive parks that are located throughout Islamorada, including Plantation Tropical Preserve, Southwinds Park, Library Beach Park, Plantation Hammock Preserve, Key Tree Cactus Preserve, and Anne's Beach. These parks are overseen by Peter Frezza, the Environmental Resource Manager for the Village, and will give presentations and updates to the Committee regarding these parks from time to time.

FOUNDERS PARK STRATEGIC PLAN: Maria explained that the Village Council along with staff suggested the Parks and Recreation Department should have a long-range goal for infrastructure and improvements at the park. Park staff put together a list of current Capital Projects including the following:

- ADA Inclusive Beach Playground – Replacement project

- Solar Street Lighting – Replacement project
- Splash Pad Surface Renovation – Replacement project
- Great Lawn Electric Upgrade – install electrical power access to existing solar light pole.
- Professional Services / Consulting and Project Management Services for Pool Resurfacing & Renovations to Locker Rooms and new Lifeguard First Aid / Break Room Project.
- Professional Services / Consulting Services for evaluation and conceptual site plan to include additional courts at the existing court location (includes proposed parking and modification of interior roadway)
- Separate “Resident” entrance to Founders Park located near Village Administrative Center

The list also mentions future projects and suggestions, including the following:

- Coral Shores High School Baseball Field (at Founders Park) Improvements – to be funded by Monroe County School District
- Village Council Chambers and Public Works Building
- Founders Park marquee signage upgrade – potential digital option
- Storage building for Parks and Recreation Department
- Installation of a golf putting green located near the existing golf driving cage.
- Artificial Turf Multi Use Field
- Equipment Barn / Shade for Park Maintenance Equipment
- Purchase property for parks
- Park at Island Silver and Spice location

COMMITTEE DISCUSSION:

Ted mentioned that adding a Putting Green near the current Golf Driving Cage would be very beneficial to the Coral Shores Golf team, as they currently do not have any facilities nearby to practice their putting and chipping. Shannon mentioned that although Founders Park is an amazing park, other parks in Islamorada should be considered for these types of usages as well because they may be underutilized. Maria mentioned that these items are things that the Committee may want to speak with the community and residents about, to get feedback and opinions. David mentioned that he would like to see the Village consider parks being built on current village owned land before other buildings like fire stations. Ted expressed concern about the preservation of public boat ramps and marinas for fishing guide and charter boat use.

FUTURE ITEMS: Continued Strategic Plan Discussion, Baseball Field Improvements Discussion

ADJOURNMENT:

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman set the next meeting date as TBD. John Weare made a motion to adjourn, Shannon Cary seconded. The meeting ended at 6:34 P.M.

Recording Secretary,

Alicia Mote

Minutes Approved by Committee on

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman _____.