

SUMMARY MINUTES

ISLAMORADA, VILLAGE OF ISLANDS PARKS & RECREATION CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, May 20, 2025
Meeting started at 5:02p.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), Alina Davis, Shannon Cary, Maria Bagiotti (IVOI), Anne Onsgard (IVOI), Alicia Mote (IVOI)

ABSENT:

Christy Hughes, Richard Russell - Justified

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE:

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman asked Village Manager Ron Saunders to lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM MEETINGS:

Ted mentioned that he did not see any recording of his conversation regarding the boat ramp and the lighthouse in the previous meeting's minutes. The Committee decided to suspend approval of the March 11 minutes until further review.

EMERGENCY AGENDA ADDITIONS OR DELETIONS:

None

COMMITTEE CHAIR ELECTIONS:

Ted Benbow motioned to nominate Carolyn Wightman to continue as Chairwoman. Shannon Cary seconded the motion, and the Committee approved unanimously. Ted also motioned to nominate Richard Russell as Vice Chairman, Natasha Early seconded, and the Committee approved unanimously (8-0).

PUBLIC COMMENT:

None

ANNA RICHARDS, VILLAGE COUNCILWOMAN AND PARKS AND RECREATION COMMITTEE LIASON – INTRODUCTION:

Anna reported that Council recently voted to apply staggered terms to all Committee members. It has also been decided to have all Committee selections happen every May, to follow in order with the LPA Committee for consistency. The staggered term limits were applied at the staff level at random. She mentioned that in May of 2026, if a member's term

has expired, they can choose to re-apply for their committee, but their seat will be open for others to apply as well. Anna expressed that as the Parks and Recreation Committee Liaison she is available to Committee members for any concerns, questions, or reports to the Council and vice-versa.

RON SAUNDERS, VILLAGE MANAGER – INTRODUCTION:

Ron spoke on a few ongoing issues regarding Founders Park, including renewing the lease to the lighthouse, which is owned by the Coast Guard, as well as the Coral Shores Baseball field project.

CORAL SHORES HIGH SCHOOL BASEBALL FIELD UPDATE:

Ron stated he has spoken to every School Board member, the Director of Operations, as well as the School Superintendent. He made it clear to them that the Village is the owner of Founders Park, and the Village needs to be included in all decision making, to which they all agreed. Ron mentioned that he has voiced two items of importance during this project. The first is that no trees are to be removed in the construction process as many of them are mitigation trees, planted after the building of the baseball field originally. The second is that there needs to be a written joint-use agreement between Coral Shores and Founders Park. Ron stated he is not sure what the exact design will be, as there are many different options floating around but he has not seen any of them personally. The latest information he has been given is that there will be two buildings, one being a 300 square foot restroom building, and the other a 600 square foot bottom floor concession stand with a top floor press box. He has also heard about offices and training rooms, but he has not seen any designs confirming this. He stated he will report back to Maria and the Committee once he has more information. Another issue regarding this project is whether to use real or artificial grass. He mentioned that the School Board is expecting to hear from the public and encourages everyone to voice their opinions on this subject.

David Epstein asked that the Parks and Recreation Committee be the communication venue for decisions regarding this project and the choice of grass to be installed. Ron stated he will recommend to the School Board that this Committee is involved from the very beginning stages. Ted mentioned that in relation to Coral Shores athletes using the park, he had previously brought the idea of putting green within Founders Park to the Committee as a helpful facility for the Coral Shores golf team. He asked if Ron and Maria might be able to review this area and bring the idea to the School Board. Ron stated he would go with whatever Maria recommended. Carolyn asked Ron if the expectation is that this improvement project will be done by the next baseball season. Ron said that he has been told that would be an unrealistic expectation, as the School Board has an agreement with KeyStar who is backed up with other projects at this time, and they don't think they can begin this project before next season. Ron said he will do anything in his power to speed up the process, but the delay is coming from other involved parties. Joe Jannach stated that he appreciates that the Parks and Recreation Committee is going to be included in this discussion and decision making, as representatives of the community. Natasha would like

Committee members to be notified of when this discussion will be held at the School Board meetings, so that members can attend. Ron mentioned he includes this type of information in his weekly emails.

Maria also asked Ron if he could give a brief update on the boat ramp at Plantation Yacht Harbor Marina. Ron stated that he walked the area with Head Dockmaster Lisa Watts, and he is aware that there are some serious questions about the location of an additional boat ramp, and the environmental impact. He spoke with Mayor Mahoney, and she would like to have the State weigh in on this possibility. Some of the issues include needing to remove mangroves, and seagrass and coral in the waters. He stated that in his experience with State legislature, he is not highly optimistic about the outcome, but it will still be discussed and there may be alternative options within the community. At the moment, there is no perfect solution, but the Council is committed to finding options for the fishing captains in the area, as Islamorada is the sports fishing capital of the world.

Ted mentioned the one of the biologists for the Bonefish Tarpon Trust told him that Bonefish studies had previously contributed \$35,000 to the Florida Keys economy, but it is now up to \$275,000 per Bonefish for its entire lifespan (18-19 years) which comes to \$464 million to the economy. Ron stated that he speaks to each Council member at least once a week, and every one of them has expressed support for the fishing guides. Alina suggested allowing a small group of fishing guides to have access to the existing boat ramp on a trial basis and keeping track of how often they are using it to better understand the problem and possibilities for access, before moving forward with creation of an additional boat ramp.

FOUNDERS DOG PARK DEDICATION TO MIKE FORSTER:

Ron presented on the dedication of the Founders Dog Park on behalf of Code Enforcement Paul Minning, who was unable to attend the meeting. Maria mentioned that the idea is to install a coral structure with a plaque attached dedicating the park to Mike Forster. She also stated that the public survey results regarding what the public would like to see the park renamed as came back, and the top response was “Mangrove” Mike Forster Dog Park. The Council will make the final decision during the upcoming June 10th meeting. Maria mentioned that there will be a dedication ceremony at the dog park once everything is finalized. This event will be posted on the Founders Park website and social media pages with more information around the reason for this dedication.

INSTRUCTOR PROGRAM REPORT:

Springboard Dive Instructor Kelly Owens stated that she has been running her program at Founders Park since November of 2018, and currently has three consistent participants. Recently in February of this year she took them to their first competitive meet in Plantation, Florida. She mentioned the program has been going well, and she also provides three weeks of a dual swim/dive camp in the summer alongside Coach Jon Olsen. Kelly grew up outside of Philadelphia, and tried out for diving at 9 years old and continued diving throughout

high school. She began teaching lessons at her local pool when she was a sophomore in high school. She did not continue diving in college because they did not have a diving program, but she continued coaching throughout college. She was then presented with the opportunity to work with the Coral Shores Dive team and also began her program here at Founders. Kelly is a Government and Economics teacher at Coral Shores during the day and works with her Springboard Dive participants at the park after school. Shannon mentioned that the comments that have rippled through the community about her program have been fantastic. Kelly stated that one of the best things about what she does is empowering young kids to push themselves to try new things, learn from their mistakes, grow as individuals, and gain confidence and life skills.

WALL OF FAME UPDATE:

Subcommittee member John Weare mentioned that their first Wall of Fame meeting was held in April. This Committee consists of members John Weare, Joseph Jannach, Alina Davis, and community member Beth Kaminstein. He mentioned that Beth discussed Ron O'Brien and his connection with the pool. The Committee has also discussed the type of media to be used for the wall and inclusion criteria. Photographic inspiration from other facilities has been presented to the members, and he is confident this project will move forward in a timely manner. The time frame will be based around the upcoming closure of the pool for resurfacing, which will ultimately be decided by Maria.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT:

Maria reported on current and future Capital Projects happening in the park. Currently the basketball and pickleball courts are being resurfaced, including new surfaces and lines. The pickleball courts will include new upgraded fencing. This project should be finished in the next three weeks. The next upcoming project is the Founders Park Draft Master Plan Workshop on Tuesday, June 24th, and she recommends that Committee members attend this workshop, as this is an opportunity to view the draft and give their input. David suggested that the Committee create their own draft before this workshop. Other Committee members agreed with his suggestion. Maria mentioned she would work on that, as she understands the Committee would like to see what information is going to be put out to the public before it is presented at the workshop.

The next upcoming project is the Pool Resurfacing and Facility Improvement Project for the Aquatic Center. She stated that the plans and scope of work are complete, and the Finance department is currently working on the request for proposal that is to be presented to the public, so that contractors can bid on the project. Once the bids are received, a staff Committee will review these bids and select a contractor. This selection will then go to the Council to be approved. Maria also stated that the timeline for project beginning is ideally the end of January/beginning of February 2026, and the completion time should take 3-4 months. Carolyn mentioned that it will be important to support the aquatic contractors during this time, in alternative options within the community. Maria also mentioned that

TDC funding for the Pool Resurfacing project has been applied for, and she will know by June 24th if it has been approved. Carolyn asked if this funding would include the Wall of Fame. John stated that they are not far enough along to submit a meaningful proposal, and Maria said this funding is only for the Resurfacing project. Ted asked if the Breakwater is now open. Maria said yes, it is now open and a beautiful place for sunsets and nature viewing.

PROGRAM REPORT:

Annie reported on the Keys Kids Swim, a program that began through the Key Largo School and Dr. Tana Carson, as a 2-week adaptive learn to swim program for kindergarten age to teach them how to swim. The Upper Keys Community Pool, Friends of the Jacobs Aquatic Center, Monroe County Board of County Commissioners, Monroe County School District, Monroe County Parks and Beaches, and the Village of Islamorada have all sponsored and supported this program. The goal is to provide this program county-wide. They have currently been running this program at the Ron Levy Aquatic center beginning last week and running through this week, with about 90 kids in attendance. A final swim test and graduation ceremony will be held on Friday, May 23rd, and those who do not pass the swim test or are not able to attend the two-week session will be given vouchers for future swim lessons. Annie invited any available Committee members to the graduation ceremony on Friday. Annie also stated that staff is welcoming back the Special Olympics Stand Up Paddleboard Games on June 21st from 9:00am to 1:00pm and Swim Meet on July 19th from 7:00am to 3:00pm, with 50 athletes competing in Paddleboard, and 150 athletes competing in the swim meet. This evening, the Synchronized Swimming Showcase is being held at the Ron Levy Aquatic Center from 5:30 -7:00pm. Summer Camps including Recreation Camp, Tennis Camp, Synchro Splash Camp, Swim/Dive Combo Camp, Swim Camp, Learn to Swim Group Lessons, and Counselor in Training Program are all being held again this year, with Recreation Camp beginning June 2nd. The UK Soccer camp, organized by the Florida Keys Soccer Club, will also be held at Founders Park in July.

SUMMER (MEMORIAL DAY – LABOR DAY) OPERATIONS UPDATE:

Ted asked if staff could raise park entrance fees permanently. He believes it is a “black eye on the Community” to only raise entrance fees on busy holiday weekends. Maria clarified that the increased entrance fees will begin Memorial Day weekend, and every weekend throughout the summer, ending after Labor Day weekend. Annie also clarified that a proposal for permanent fee schedule increases will be brought to the next Parks and Recreation Committee meeting. The decision to increase park entrance fees on summer weekends comes from a successful implementation from last summer, and without a full scope plan finalized to be presented to the Committee at this time. Maria stated that if the Committee decides that the increase in entrance fees should be every day through the summer instead of weekends only, it should be discussed, and a recommendation can be made to bring to Council. Carolyn mentioned that there needs to be a clear understanding of where the entrance fee funds go, so that when it comes time to explain why the fees are being increased, it will include proper education and reasoning. David mentioned wanting

to see a separate discounted fee for Monroe County residents. Annie stated that it is something that will be included in the full scope plan that will be presented at the next meeting. Ted motioned to allow the current entrance fees (\$8.00 per adult/\$5.00 per youth/senior) to be applied to Monroe County residents only, and to apply the increased rate of \$15.00 per adult/\$10.00 per youth/senior to any Non-Monroe County residents 7 days a week throughout the summer. David Epstein seconded this motion. John Weare spoke against the motion, as he would like to wait a little longer to see staff's fully prepared proposal for all fee increases. Natasha, Alina and Carolyn agreed with John, for the same reason. The motion was not approved (2-4). Maria mentioned that she agrees with David and Ted's points, but it is best to give time to fully prepare a proposal. Ted voiced his concerns about getting bad press and complaints when increasing rates just for the summer.

Annie also mentioned that on top of increased fees, staff also employed a Zero Tolerance for Alcohol policy in the park, to maintain the family-friendly environment of the park. This policy requires police assistance, and a police detail will be included every weekend to support staff in their enforcement of park policies. The Zero Tolerance policy is given as a written and verbal warning, and any violators will be asked to leave the park without a refund.

FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS:

Increased Park Fee Schedule Discussion and Recommendations

Pool Resurfacing Project Update

Baseball Field Renovation Project Update

ADJOURNMENT:

Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman set the next regular meeting date as TBD, sometime in July. Carolyn made a motion to adjourn, John Weare seconded. The meeting ended at 6:52 P.M.

Recording Secretary,

Alicia Mote

Minutes Approved by Committee on
Chairwoman Carolyn Wightman _____.