



## **Parks and Recreation Commission Meeting Minutes**

May 24, 2023

The Centre at University Park

**Attendance:** Matt Buie, J.T. Ferstl (Virtual), Ben France (Virtual), Samuel Ellis, Cannon Fletcher, Mike Bernardo

**Absent:** Director Peck, Director Andrea Lewis, Lauren Eldridge, Linda Smith, Ron Bara

**City Board of Director Liaison:** Director Andrea Lewis, Director Capi Peck

**LRPR Staff:** Leland Couch, Angela Nelson, Shawanda Robinson, Justin Dorsey, Briana Hatfield, City Attorney Beth Carpenter

**Welcome, and Introductions:** Chairman Buie called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone present. Chairman Buie then introduced the two new commissioners to the meeting: Ron Bara (not present) and Mike Bernardo. Chairman Buie asked Commissioner Bernardo to introduce himself and give a brief explanation as to why he got involved. Commissioner Bernardo mentioned that he was retired military, he served active and reservist, a retired IT Manager, has four children, and very familiar with the use of Parks and Recreation; He coaches competitive and recreational sports and plays golf and volleyball, etc., an active Pickle ball player. Also, play a lot at Kanis Park (familiar with that area). He has no particular reason in joining the Commission other than he thought he could contribute and hoping that he can because it is an important part of the community. Chairman Buie thanked him for his service and mentioned that he looked forward to working with him. He then proceeded to roll call and the approval of April's minutes.

**Roll Call and Approval of Minutes:** Briana Hatfield called the roll, and Chairman Buie reported that a quorum in attendance was six (6) members. Chairman Buie thanked everyone for coming; Chairman Buie then asked for the April 24th minutes to be approved. The motion passed, and the minutes were approved.

**Citizen Communication:** Chairman Buie yielded the floor to Ryan Pruitt of Walton Heights Homeowner's Association Board for Citizen Communication. Mr. Pruitt thanked Briana Hatfield for setting up his computer for his presentation. He came to request help designing and perhaps funding a neighborhood and community playground in their neighborhood, located at the trailhead of River Mountain Drive. Utilizing his computer, he provided a diagram of where the project would be, between Conner Park and Two Rivers Park. Their HOA was funded over 50 years ago with over 500 homes. The point of the project site is the trailhead of the River

Mountain Trail with mountain bikes. It is a hub right now for their community, especially the mountain biking community. Their desire as a neighborhood would be to use Little Rock land to build a playground in conjunction with the Parks and Recreation Dept. They are petitioning to use Parks and Recreation property on the South or North side of South Ridge Drive. Mr. Pruitt has walked the site with Director Couch and Director Peck. Mr. Pruitt mentioned that the area slopes significantly, so there's a great opportunity to build a beautiful terrace and playground. Talking with Director Couch we looked at some ideas where we could have a cascading playground option with slides and swings and ropes, and all ADA accessible. They would have ramps connecting down the terrace with a view towards the south if we built on the South side of South Ridge, and or on the North it looks down toward the cascading mountain bike trail. That is our request, for you to approve the use of City property, either for Walton Heights to build it ourselves, or partnering with you to build it together with a matching possibility.

Chairman Buie then asked for questions and comments for Mr. Pruitt. Commissioner Fletcher mentioned that he's walked the trail from Conner Park. He continued that it's a unique spot to have an intersection for the neighborhood.

Director Couch commented that he appreciated Mr. Pruitt's presentation and mentioned that he liked the idea of partnering, because Parks and Recreation partners with a lot of people on different projects, so he would like to hear more about that in the future.

Chairman Buie thanked Mr. Pruitt once again and Commissioner Ben France asked if it was City Park land that Mr. Pruitt was requesting the use of. Mr. Pruitt confirmed it was. Director Couch then clarified that the land is currently River Mountain Park which has a mountain bike trail facility in part of it, that goes across South Ridge. There is Park land there that is not dedicated to an actual park, is in between River Mountain and Conner Park. Conner Park is a bigger western park with 10 acres on Cantrell Road. Commissioner France asked if there was a power line easement nearby, and Director Couch confirmed it was. He also mentioned that it had somewhat been addressed as far as making sure if a playground was done there that it does meet powerline constraints. Those are some of the details that the neighborhood has been looking into to ensure there is no conflict.

Commissioner Ellis mentioned that this was a great spot in the neighborhood. He lives near the area and has heard some of the ideas and thoughts going behind the playground. He commented that it would be a great way to connect the neighborhood to Conner Park and what Parks and Recreation is doing with mountain biking on the South side and the North side as well as having some type of park or playground equipment. Some questions proposed were: would that affect any of the parking? There are just a couple of spaces, so would that affect that? Or would it be behind there?

Mr. Pruitt responded that one of the benefits they saw was that there was already on site parking. Most families would be able to walk there, but the idea is that it would be down the hill. With ADA they are looking at ramps and switchbacks, but also you would be able to have a bridge that would go straight out from the parking lot to an upper raised playground and terrace and then go down from there.

Director Couch also commented that Commissioner Ellis' concerns were valid, and that a lot of the neighborhood parks don't have parking facilities, and the logic behind that is that it's their

neighborhood park, and they shouldn't have to drive there, so that's one concept. However, before this grew legs any further, there would need to be a public meeting that the neighborhood would be invited to, and they could share their concerns. Another way to handle that is to make sure that the neighborhood and everyone that's involved in that adjacent area would be on board and understand the project. Commissioner Ellis clarified that it wasn't so much of a concern as it was wanting more information. He believes it's an interesting idea and would benefit many children in the neighborhood. It would be really great to have something like that so close to the neighborhood, that wouldn't require extra parking. He knows that the current parking is used by mountain bikers and hikers and wouldn't want to interfere with that.

Chairman Buie then rounded out that portion of the commission meeting by mentioning and clarifying that additional public meetings would need to be held, as well as additional conversations with Parks and Recreation. If something comes from those meetings then it would be brought back before the commission.

City Attorney Beth Carpenter mentioned that with City-owned property, if we are talking about the potential leasing of City property, according to the state statute, that would need to be bid out. Director Couch responded that there would be no leasing, to his understanding. If this project made it to ground it would actually be just a project for Little Rock Parks and Recreation to build an amenity for the neighborhood and the citizens of Little Rock.

Chairman Buie then called for any staff reports.

**Staff Reports:** Director Couch asked all staff to go down the list with their reports after introducing all the Deputy Directors to Commissioner Bernardo. He then handed the floor to Deputy Director Angela Nelson to begin staff reports with Resource Administration.

### Administration

Deputy Director of Administration, Angela Nelson, informed the commission that there was a date change from May 10th to May 24th, expressed appreciation that the members could still come and apologized for any inconvenience that may have caused. As a department, Parks and Recreation wrapped up employee appreciation week. The department was given the opportunity to select employees of the year, and one of those candidates was Michael Garrity, the Marathon and Emergency Management Assistant. He has been with the city for 12 years. The other was Linda Bealer. She works at Stephens Community Center and is the Facility Supervisor. The department selected them because they were very deserving of that award and recognition.

The department is still working on the Statement of Value Inventory. Because of the storm damage we are evaluating a lot of assets that we have, things that are missing and need to be accounted for. We are still working on that, and in conjunction to that we are working on our division capital assets, which involves all assets. We are just trying to stay on top of that so we can get a head start and be completed with this by the end of the year.

Our Summer Playground Program starts June 12th, and we are still trying to reach our goals of getting people staffed in positions. We are really close to reaching those goals. As a department we have filled 8 positions. 5 were in maintenance, 1 in administration, and 2 in recreation. By the

end of the month we will possibly have two more candidates for filling two more positions. We hope to get everything filled by September. That concludes my report on resources.

Chairman Buie thanked Deputy Director Nelson for her report and then called for questions. There were none, so Chairman Buie gave Deputy Director Craig the floor.

### Recreation

Recreation Programs Deputy Director Shawanda Craig greeted the floor by discussing the status of West Central and FEMA. FEMA will continue to be stationed at West Central until June 8th. She will give an update on that if it does extend longer than June 8th. The pools are open at Jim Dailey Fitness Center and Southwest pool will open on May 27th. The Summer Playground Program will begin on June 12th and go through July 27th. They are still taking registrations, and it is \$100 per child. Jim Dailey pools will start swimming lessons soon so if you have anyone that would like to become a lifeguard, we are still seeking lifeguards. Please check in with the staff at Jim Dailey and Southwest. They will have to go through a prerequisite course and then the Red Cross training to become a lifeguard. Once they are certified then we can employ them as a lifeguard for the city of Little Rock.

MacArthur has a traveling exhibit: Military Women's Memorial in Arlington. They will be here Saturday, June 17th, through August 26th. Therapeutic Recreation will have their summer camp at War Memorial golf course. We are making changes there, hopefully, once we get that completed we can invite you guys out to look at our new space.

The golf tournament at Rebsamen was a success, and the staff enjoyed having you all there playing golf this past Saturday.

Deputy Director Robinson concluded her report, and Chairman Buie called for questions. Commissioner Ben France asked in regards to the Summer program, how many kids on average are there. Deputy Director Craig responded that East Little Rock will have 100, Stephens will have 120, Dunbar will have 210, and we have two schools: Baseline Elementary-150, and Washington Elementary will have 150. It's \$100 for 7 weeks. There are additional activities and programs that these places provide but they also cost for the children to attend.

With no more questions, Chairman Matt Buie handed the floor over to Operations Deputy Director Justin Dorsey.

### Operations

Deputy Director Dorsey started his reports by mentioning Urban Forestry and the aftermath and cleanup of the tornado. Just this past month the Urban Forestry division has removed more than 100 damaged trees, not counting limbs. We are working on developing plans to plant more trees. There are a couple grant opportunities, we are in the research and partnering phase with a couple different garden clubs to possibly get some grants for new tree planting opportunities. Splash pads will be opening this Friday. The guys have all those painted, caulked, and pressure-washed clean so we are excited that all four of the splash pads will be open at 10 am. They will be open 10 am to 9 pm every day.

With the Design and Operations division we have Dunbar Gardens. The new sculpture there, the dedication was this past month. We appreciate the commissioners that came out and were present. That meant a lot to staff to see you all come out and support. We are working on several new site plans, and new projects are coming: Boyle, Kiwanis, and Pankey Parks. We're getting ready to start on designs for that. As Deputy Director Craig mentioned, we are wrapping up renovations for War Memorial Pro Shop. When that space gets finished we would love to have you all out to see that new purpose space.

We look forward to program and rent out that area.

The guys completed several repairs at Southwest and Jim Dailey and the outdoor pool facilities. In addition to that, the guys have done a really good job of being able to manage these projects. There's a new service entrance gate at Boyle, and it was done completely in-house. We were having a lot of illegal dumping at Boyle, and they were able to get it taken care of in between other projects.

Chairman Buie and Deputy Director Dorsey opened the floor to questions. Commissioner Fletcher asked if War Memorial Pro Shop was going to be a staff location or event space. Deputy Director Dorsey responded that it would be a rentable event space.

With no further questions, and no other staff reports, Chairman Buie shifted the agenda to old business.

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### Old Business

Chairman Buie opened the old business by asking if there were any updates or new information regarding the tornado damage. Director Couch mentioned that they are still moving forward with cleanup and that their contractor DRS has been working diligently at Reservoir and have cleared most of the down trees, and Murray's cleanup is coming along too. Rock Creek is the next big focus out there. Director Couch mentioned that he had covered it a lot during this meeting, but also stated he was open to questions. Chairman Buie mentioned that he saw some bins outside of Butler Park, and inquired as to what they were for. Director Couch stated that Public Works put some waste containers to put people can put debris and trash into. He was unsure about how long they were going to be there.

Chairman Buie looked over old business concerning Park highlights, the golf tournament, and the social event. He asked if there were any questions about the old business as of yet. Commissioner Fletcher brought up the free Little Rock Open, and invited everyone to come out and spectate. He mentioned that last year's winner won the Australian Open's doubles tournament, and the guy he beat Ben Shelton, is now 35 or 37 in the world. Several of the competitors are also in the top 100. He reiterated that the Open was free this year and that there were new sponsors, so it would be great to have good attendance. He mentioned that there is a sign in the front, but it states that there has been about \$6 million worth of community impact from all the events and tournaments. He just wanted to highlight that. Deputy Director Craig thanked the commissioner for bringing it up because it was something that both she and Director Couch wanted to touch on. Director Couch mentioned that it was from May 28th through June

4th. He mentioned that it was a bigger event for the department. He mentioned Parks and Recreation now has a three-year commitment with UAMS.

Director Couch, then requested the commission move on to New Business and Chairman Buie then turned the floor over to Director Couch.

### New Business

Director Couch began by mentioning that he has gotten all their bond and ARPA projects approved. One of the bond projects was getting new lights at Rebsamen Tennis Center. Out of ARPA funds, the senior center is one of the projects being handled. They had a kickoff meeting to approve vendors and professional services for design of the community centers and senior center. The senior center is in the Centre at University Park. An aspect of that design is the Pickleball complex, and that will come online in the near future. It will tie this facility into the Rebsamen Tennis Center. Director Couch also briefly wanted to cover the other bond and ARPA projects. The professional design services are expected to be finished with their part of the project before the end of the year, so that they can put it out to bid early next year to have some improvements to the community centers. They will focus on four of the community centers, the senior center, and the West Central ball field complex for the ARPA projects. Commissioner France asked for more information regarding the senior center. Director Couch explained that currently The Park at University is closed for board and commission meetings, but the idea is that they will be able to repurpose this facility slightly. Realistically add on to the southern end of this building, and concepts are looking at more space and a therapeutic pool, and the different aspects of what that would be. For many years there has been the thought to add a Pickleball facility to Rebsamen Tennis, and so when the discussion to move seniors to the facility started, Parks and Recreation thought it would be a good idea to house those projects together. There are no drawings at this time, and are open to receiving input.

### Score Card Analysis

Director Couch wanted to start a process for more city-wide engagement. He suggested to do a quick study with the Commissioners. Using some small note cards, he asked the Commission to write about what they think the most important things are in facilities and programs that they have. Write two items under each of these four categories: Recreation, Programs, Facilities, and the last one is other, where you can put anything you want. Then at the next meeting, Director Couch will do this again, and in between this meeting and next, use that opportunity to research some more about Little Rock Parks and Recreation. We'll take this meeting's information and see who's familiar with what, and next month we'll have more defined. We'll combine that information and narrow it down to five top things that we really want to market and promote, pushing it to the top of everything we talk about. If you would like to email in topics that is appreciated also.

Chairman Buie called for questions, and seeing there were none, moved on to the next topic.

### Future Dates in Webex

Director Couch apologized for having to move the meeting date because of personal conflicts. In the future he will do his best not to have to move dates around again. He started looking down on the calendar to make sure there were no other conflicts, and unfortunately there is one in October, which coincides with a national conference. The majority of the people that attend the commission will be at that conference, so he wanted to know what the commission wanted to do about the meeting, whether they would prefer substitutes to present the information, or change the date entirely. The only Parks and Recreation staff member that would not be at the conference would be Mike Garrity. Director Couch was not expecting an immediate answer, but instead wanted to bring it to the commission's attention so that it could be resolved. Regarding Webex, Director Couch wanted it known that he preferred in-person meetings, but he knows that Webex is something that will always be there. He is willing to discuss continuing Webex but wanted to have that conversation at least. Chairman Buie asked the commission to give their thoughts on changing commission dates in the future and how to handle it. Director Couch mentioned that staff would be gone for about 4 days, so it would not be feasible to change the date for another one that same week. He also mentioned that some commissioners had reached out and informed him that they had put that meeting on their calendar and so any date changes would need to be well in advance. Chairman Buie asked the commission to be thinking about an alternative date that would work for the majority of the members, so that it can be discussed at the next meeting.

### Sub-committee Reports

Chairman Buie then turned to the sub-committee reports.

First up is Social Media and Outreach with Commissioner France. There was no report.

Next up was the Master Plan Committee, with Commissioner Linda Smith. There was no report.

Finally, the last sub-committee is Parks Conservancy. The liaison was not present, but Commissioner Fletcher asked Chairman Buie if he could give an update on a ballpark estimate of how many people have signed up. Chairman Buie mentioned that about 10 people have signed up so far. In the last Conservancy meeting they agreed that they will put together a formal plan announcing things and bringing everything to light. Look for more information on that in the future. They are hoping to have some media announcements, announcing that the conservancy is supporting some local projects with funds that have been raised by the Conservancy. They are looking also to have some events scheduled in the future as well so that people can come out and learn more about the Conservancy. The Conservancy's mission is to support Little Rock Parks and Recreation, its the nonprofit 501c3 partner so fundraising is the name of the game. Getting more people engaged hopefully will get more people in the friends program and lead to individual contributions.

Chairman Buie ended the report on that, and before moving to discussion items for next meeting Director Couch wanted to mention a couple of dates. The Little Rock Open (May 28th- June 4th) and Mud Run at War Memorial on Markham on the 18th fairway on June 3rd. The last event, which is not a public event but is on June 5th, will be floating Fish Creek. It will be launching from Benny Craig Park at 10 am. This is something that we are doing to take different people down the creek to show them. We are also introducing it to our newer staff. It is one of the official water trails in the city. It is a beautiful area that is unfortunately full of trash but that's

another story to address later. Commissioner France asked about canoes, and Director Couch responded that there might be some extra rooms in the existing facilities that they have. They are working with Norm Berner, who got all the canoes from Audoban, Arkansas and he is filling those up. Director Couch is bringing his own, as well as staff. Commissioner Ellis also volunteered to help anyone that might not have access to their own canoe. Director Couch expressed his appreciation for the commissioners that came out to the sculpture and asked that if they wanted to come to any of the other events please let him know.

#### Discussion Items for Next Meeting

This concludes the Committee Reports. The next topic is the agenda for the next meeting.

Chairman Buie asked to add a section to next meeting's agenda for upcoming events so that we have it there every month. Chairman Buie then asked if there was anything else that needed to be added to the agenda, and Commissioner Bernardo mentioned that he had a couple questions. The first question was regarding security. He mentioned that he knows park security is a huge thing, especially out at Kanis, because it impacts the reputation and the draw. He mentioned that he would like to add that to the agenda and maybe discuss with the police for any information. Director Couch agreed and mentioned that he has reached out to LRPD a lot, but will see if they can send a representative to the next meeting to inform the commission about what's going on. He mentioned that LRPD is doing a lot of great things but to let them hear from us and what our concerns are would be better, as well as letting us understand what they are or are not doing. Chairman Buie asked that we put security as a new business item for next month's meeting. Commissioner Bernardo's next question concerned Pickleball. He mentioned that if anyone wanted him to give a 5-10 minute overview of what Pickleball is and how it's growing in the communities around us, he would be more than willing. Chairman Buie thanked him and mentioned that they have heard so much about Pickleball in the last 5-6 years. In fact they've have numerous representatives around the city come talk about it. Chairman Buie asked if there were any other agenda items for next month, and Director Couch asked to keep the scorecards on there. Chairman Buie mentioned that neither of the City Directors were present so there was no liaison feedback this month. Director Couch mentioned that he did know Director Peck, owner of Trio's which was greatly impacted by the tornado, just opened Monday. She said she wouldn't make it.

This concludes the Wednesday, May 24, 2023, Park Commission Meeting. The next meeting will be Wednesday, June 14, 2023, at The Centre at University Park at noon. Buie encouraged all who could attend the following events in person. Chairman Buie thanked everyone for their reports.

**Meeting Adjourned.**