

Somers Parks & Recreation Board

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Kevin Westerman
Chairman



MEETING MINUTES

May 5, 2021

Chairman Westerman opened the meeting at 7:00 p.m.

The members present were: Jim Boniello, Stephen Krug, Chris McCormack, Don Penzine, Michele Sanz, Michele Werney, and Kevin Westerman.

John Papalia and John Zattola were absent.

Councilman Tom Garrity and Parks and Recreation Superintendent Steve Ralston were also present.

The meeting was held via Zoom.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Public comment was covered under Old Business.

MINUTES

A motion was made by Mrs. Sanz to approve the minutes of March 24, 2021 monthly meeting as submitted. Mr. McCormack seconded the motion. All were in favor.

MR. RALSTON'S REPORT

Mr. Westerman asked about the electric car charging station to be placed in Reis Park. A grant was applied for by the former Town Planner and awarded to place two electrical car charging stations in VanTassell Park, one at the Police Station and the other at the Recreation Center. It was determined that two were not needed there, so Supervisor Morrissey asked if one could be placed in Reis Park. The location is in the first bay down by the tennis courts. It will be for public use and requires a payment to use it.

NEW BUSINESS

Tennis Courts, Modifications and Rules Discussion – Resident Teresa Chang was interested in offering pickle ball for pick-up games. Board members Jim Boniello and John Papalia have also expressed interest in having this sport available to the residents. Mrs. Chang has been setting up the nets and drawing the lines on several of the sport courts. This offering is available at times when tennis is not in high demand, on the weekends from 2 to 5

p.m. and the response has been good. She welcomes anyone who wants to participate and they have extra paddles. Mr. Ralston hopes that pickle ball will be a permanent program offered through the Department at some point. Mrs. Chang said she pays to play at another court and the fee is \$100, resulting in a revenue generator. Pickle ball is an inter-generational program and very social. It is an upcoming sport, very easy to learn and great for the community. Tomorrow she will be meeting with Mr. Ralston to discuss assistance with placing the lines.

Resident Win Chang, a high-level tennis player would like permission via a permit to use a ball machine in a corner court when the court otherwise has little to no use. The machine is a new generation of this type of equipment and is small, portable and the ball stays in one location. Given the accuracy of the machine and his level of skill, he would not have balls going into another court. Another issue is other players' balls going into the court he is using, so if anyone shows up to use the courts, he would stop using the machine immediately. Mr. Ralston said he could issue a permit designating days and times which will allow this activity to be monitored. He will also limit the amount of these types of permits to be issued. All were in favor of this approach to the request.

OLD BUSINESS

Basketball Courts Re-Opening Discussion – At the monthly meeting in March, a decision was made by the Board to keep the nets and rims removed from the basketball courts at Reis Park, as basketball remains designated by the Westchester Department of Health as a higher risk sport *vis-à-vis* COVID-19, and requires mask wearing as well as monitoring by the Town. Basketball is so designated because, among sports, it has the least ability to maintain physical distance and avoid touching shared equipment. Unlike organized play, such as tournaments and league games, which have controls and protocols in place, pick-up basketball games in Reis Park would be very difficult to monitor and enforce, particularly in the evenings and weekends when no staff is present. Without protocols to enforce mask wearing, as well as sign-ins and temperature checks, as required by the WDOH, all agreed that the current risks warranted keeping the rims and nets off the court at this time.

Many residents joined the meeting this evening and Mr. Westerman addressed them as well as his fellow Board members to discuss some of the issues with re-opening the basketball courts. It was noted that, except for basketball, all other sports and activities at Reis Park, such as baseball, soccer, girls' softball, men's softball, tennis, laser tag have returned in phases, as dictated by the New York State Sports and Recreation Guidelines and the Westchester Department of Health guidelines. With the organized sports, the various commissioners committed to enforce the safety protocols or risk having their permits to play withdrawn.

The Town is required to follow the safety protocols of the Westchester Department of Health, which put together a comprehensive safety plan. The Board cannot choose to follow some safety rules and ignore others. The Parks and Recreation Board has an obligation to make a decision that would not adversely affect residents through the use of Parks facilities and must be cautious of those risks when considering whether to accommodate a group who want the opportunity to partake in a non-organized high-risk sport. Members of this voluntary advisory

Board are all residents and parents who want all facilities to be safely used. Their recommendations to the Town Board must consider the welfare of all residents.

The issue before the Board is how to follow the required protocols of the WDOH, which requires mask wearing and monitoring of the basketball games, when there are no commissioners to assume the responsibility and there is no money available in the budget to hire monitors. The onus would have to be on the police. Although the Board is interested in hearing what everyone has to say this evening, a decision will not be made tonight as the Board will need time to think about, and give consideration to, the comments made, engage in a conversation, and make a recommendation to the Town Board for their ultimate decision. All were asked to raise their hand when they want to speak and state their full name.

Kelly Mitchell addressed the Board. Basketball is being considered a high-risk sport because it is played indoors. If played outside, it puts it in a different category. Although the WCDOH is giving the rules, they are not considering the fact that as of today there are only 20 active cases in the Town of Somers, the Town has done an outstanding job in dealing with the pandemic and there is no reason not to allow outdoor basketball. The pandemic has increased the number of cases of depression and drug use resulting in an 800% increase in the need for care.

Jack Duffy commended Ms. Mitchell on what she said.

Cindy Russo said her son is going to other Towns to play basketball. She would like to know where the disconnect is, what the go forward plan is and who will make that decision.

Keith Keimig addressed the Board. By Somers not allowing basketball to be played, they are forcing the youth residents to go to other locations and not being with their friends. If they really want to play, they will find a way.

Tricia Sternberg echoed Ms. Mitchell's sentiments. Our youth's mental health is being affected 100%. The school has done a great job getting them back in the classroom, why can't the Town do the same.

Nicki Mullins stated that the students are playing basketball at the Somers Intermediate School during recess.

Ms. Mitchell addressed the Board again. Taking risks are part of life and they can be part of everything we do. You owe it to the community to put the hoops up.

Mr. Westerman reminded everyone that he is only one vote on the Board. His opinion is that basketball should remain closed until the WCDOH changes outdoor basketball to an intermediate risk sport or lessens the restrictions for it.

Kenneth Mitchell said his emails were not responded to and in his opinion, science should be followed, not the WCDOH guidelines. He asked at what expense the Board is protecting the community.

Mr. Westerman responded that he personally responded to the emails asking for information and although the positivity rate is good, they are still required to follow the WCDOH's guidelines for high-risk sports. The Town is monitoring for when the WCDOH changes basketball from a high-risk activity to an intermediate or low risk sport or changes the protocol that has to be enforced. If other Towns are not following the rules that is their business and he finds it hard to believe that, with every other sport having already returned to Reis, not having four basketball hoops in a Town where home basketball hoops are plentiful could be the cause of mental health issues of Somers youth.

Mr. Mitchell said other Towns are not breaking the rules, they have just found other ways to follow the WCDOH's guidelines.

Mr. Penzine said he has been a member of the Board for over 20 years and they are totally committed to the kids of the community, but have always followed the rules and done the right thing.

Mr. Westerman reminded everyone that the Parks and Recreation Department doesn't have the ability to monitor the courts.

Mr. Boniello said if the WCDOH is not able to distinguish between indoor and outdoor basketball that is ridiculous and it is incumbent upon the Parks and Recreation Board to make a common-sense decision about this issue.

Kevin Marcus addressed the Board. Rules have to be backed up with those that are thoughtful and make sense. The impact of not offering this activity is not be considered and there is no logical reason why outdoor basketball cannot be offered. In his opinion the Parks and Recreation Board is failing completely in not making a decision and should be courageous enough to not follow the WCDOH's rules because they don't make sense.

Mr. Westerman disputed the argument as framed by Mr. Marcus that the Board would be courageous only if it agreed with him and not courageous if it disagreed with his position.

Mr. Marcus said basing the decision on science will result in the right decision.

Paul Padavoni addressed the Board. You can't turn a blind eye to COVID, but data doesn't support thinking that you are putting others in jeopardy by allowing basketball.

Mr. Krug doesn't think anyone on the Board disagrees with the concerns expressed. Dealing with this issue is a real struggle and the mere monitoring of the courts when there is no staff in the Park is the problem. All the sports have to adhere to the rule of monitoring. There is not a lack of desire to allow basketball, it is a monitoring issue and a creative solution has to be determined.

Mr. Westerman reminded everyone that there is a monitoring system in place for all other sports being played at Reis.

Mr. Mitchell said then Steve Ralston should be responsible for figuring out a system for monitoring basketball.

Mr. Ralston said that he and Andrew Johnson are in the office from 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. They can monitor as best they can during that time and self-policing is helpful. The issue is after hours and on the weekend. If the rules are not followed, a citation could be issued to the Town. If sign up was required and the basketball courts could be locked that would be ideal. Unfortunately, there is no money in the budget to hire monitors.

Mrs. Werney said the Board is trying to figure out a solution and taking everyone's concerns into consideration. Perhaps the parents of the kids who want to play basketball can help out with monitoring when the staff is not there.

Liz Keimig asked how the playground is able to be used, but not being monitored. She has also been witness to the rules not be adhered to at baseball games.

Mr. Westerman said that if the baseball games are not being monitored, they are at risk of having their permit pulled. Playing on the playground is not considered high risk.

Mrs. Keimig said when she is at the Park, other than organized sports, nothing is being monitored.

Ms. Mitchell asked if someone is allowed to carry a football or volleyball into the Park. If it is not organized, is it considered high risk. Why is basketball the only sport at question. The rules don't make sense and no one is using common sense. What if someone is just playing catch with a football or volleyball. What about cheerleaders just practicing. Just think about the mental health issues.

Mr. Westerman said there is a difference between throwing a football or volleyball ball around and playing a basketball game and that we can disagree with the designations and protocols of the WDOH, but the Board does not have the luxury of simply ignoring the safety protocols.

Mrs. Sanz stated that when those in attendance at the Parks Board meeting were asked to help with monitoring there was no response. You are all asking us to give consideration, but you are not willing to do the same.

Mr. Padavoni responded that it was not a direct ask. It is up to the Board to figure it out and make a decision, not us.

Mr. Westerman said that the Board did indeed ask the public for ideas and suggestions and the only response was that it was Mr. Ralston's job to figure it out.

Mr. Penzine said the nets were taken down and clearly you are all not happy with that decision. Suggests something to us then.

Mr. Mitchell stressed the need for a decision to be made based on science and data, not what the WCDOH says.

Ms. Mitchell suggested that signs be posted at the basketball courts indicating that the Town of Somers is not responsible and/or having players sign waivers. Everyone else is doing that, why can't the Town.

Mr. Krug reiterated that it is a challenge to identify and find solutions while adhering to the guidelines and it is the Board's decision to make. A motion was made by Mr. Krug and seconded by Mr. Boniello to further investigate. All were in favor.

Mr. Westerman said that, if in the meantime the WCDOH changes the guidelines, or if the Board can come up with a way to address the monitoring issue, then a Special Meeting will be scheduled.

Mr. Boniello would like to know the WCDOH's interpretation of indoor vs. outdoor basketball. Mr. Ralston will follow up.

Alycia Forbes addressed the Board. Neighboring towns are allowing basketball and some have created a resolution to wearing face coverings. She is in favor of opening the courts and feels the mental health impact is huge.

Mr. Penzine thanked everyone for their time and urged that the phone calls to Mr. Ralston about this issue stop.

Mr. Marcus thanked Mr. Ralston for being a great partner and asset of the Town.

Day Camp Updates – Sixty-nine campers have been registered to date. Some counselors and a health director still need to be hired. Those needs will be advertised in The Somers Record and at Somers High School. Registration continues through the end of May. Mr. Ralston does not anticipate any changes in the current WCDOH guidelines they are required to follow.

Bailey Park Project Review Update – Mary Ann Rivera, of Landscape Concepts submitted the final proposal for Bailey Park. More details are needed so the Town Board can make a decision and if favorable, to create a bid package. Mr. Boniello will meet with Mr. Ralston tomorrow to list that missing information.

MR. RALSTON'S COMMENTS

Thanks were extended to the Board for their continued support during this very difficult year. Following the guidelines has not only be challenging, but not easy at times.

BOARD COMMENTS

Mr. Penzine reported that the new playground equipment is fantastic. Mr. Westerman said there should be a story done about it in The Somers Record.

Mr. McCormack wanted to thank Mr. Ralston and Mr. Westerman for their time and effort with the recent inquiries about re-opening the basketball courts.

Mr. Krug complimented Mr. Westerman for the great job he did in handling the multitude of residents that attended the meeting this evening with concerns about the basketball courts being closed. Mr. Penzine echoed his sentiments.

Mr. Westerman appreciated the compliments. He is only one voice and opinion, and encourages all the Board members to express their feelings on the subject.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:45 p.m. and the next meeting will take place on Wednesday, May 26th at 6:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Denise Schirmer, Secretary
Parks and Recreation Board

cc: Parks and Recreation Board
Superintendent of Parks and Recreation
Town Board
Town Clerk