

Somers Parks & Recreation Board

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Kevin Westerman
Chairman



SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES **Re-Opening the Basketball Courts in Reis Park** **May 13, 2021**

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

The members present were: Jim Boniello, Stephen Krug, John Papalia, Don Penzine, Michele Sanz, Michele Werney, Kevin Westerman, and John Zattola.

Chris McCormack was absent.

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

The meeting was held via Zoom.

The purpose for holding this special meeting was to present a solution to re-opening the basketball courts in Reis Park as a result of the objections expressed by some residents at the May 5, 2021 Parks and Recreation Board meeting. It was made clear that the Parks and Recreation Board can only recommend a solution to the Town Board, who would ultimately make a final decision to accept, reject or modify the recommendation.

Chairman Westerman read aloud his statement regarding the situation:

At the May 5 Parks Board Meeting, it was determined that the ability to monitor the basketball courts was the issue that needed to be resolved to allow the rims to be returned. Within two days of the meeting, Board Members had spoken with each other, spoke with Parks Superintendent Steve Ralston and, working with Steve Ralston, a proposed solution to the monitoring issue was drafted.

Over the weekend, the proposed solution was sent to the Parks Board members for review and comment. On Monday morning, the Board began coordinating their schedules to convene a Special Meeting to vote on the proposed solution. It's not always so easy to do this on short notice, as the Board has 9 members, plus the Board secretary and Superintendent. By Tuesday morning, the meeting was scheduled for today. Monday, we received an email from a resident asking two questions: (1) when is the follow-up meeting; and (2) what have we done to "follow up on the suggestions made by the public at the May 5 meeting." Throughout this

issue, we have answered emails requesting information, giving substantive info. We even provided people with the actual State and County guidelines that the Town was following regarding the basketball courts.

With a meeting now scheduled, I answered this email. I informed the writer about the day and time of the meeting. Regarding the specific question about “the suggestions made by the public” I didn’t recall any, so I checked with others who attended and they didn’t recall either. I responded that I do not recall any ideas or suggestions made by the public, but offered that “if you are aware of any ideas or suggestions made by the public, please let us know and they will all receive their due consideration.”

My email was posted on Facebook without the context of the specific question to which I was responding. The poster was “appalled and insulted”, and the response was presented as though the Parks Board was expecting the public to resolve the issue.

Even without context, my response simply does not say or even hint at that. It said, if you have an idea, we will be happy to listen and consider. If we had taken the opposite position, that we would not consider suggestions from the public, there would be justifiable outrage.

Saying that the Parks Board was requiring the Public to resolve the issue was a misrepresentation of the Board’s position, I imagine intended to outrage people. There can be no mistake about this, because I immediately clarified by writing, “I have neither stated, nor suggested, that this is the public's problem. I merely responded to your email where you asked about the Board’s ‘follow up on the suggestions made by the public.’” Showing that the Board has been working the issue, I also wrote that we would detail the steps taken by the Board at the scheduled meeting. That is part of what I’m doing now.

The Facebook post achieved its apparently intended purpose, inflaming people, who have now written angry letters to the Town and posted their outrage that the Town expects the public to resolve the issue. The poster watched this without correction, clarification or offering context, much less saying that it was untrue.

This is not the first time regarding this issue where people have tried to foment outrage by mischaracterizing facts. This is unproductive negative energy that has no place in our community.

With some people, not everyone, but usually the loudest voices, it is not enough to disagree with a position, some feel that they must vilify those who hold a different position. The Parks Department and Board have been called lazy, hacks, paralyzed by fear, told that Board members – who are all parents and grandparents - must not care about the mental health of our Somers youth.

My name, mobile number and work email address were posted on a Facebook page and people were urged to bother me. I am not an elected official, or even a civil servant, I am a volunteer.

No matter how strongly you feel about a position, I refuse to believe that this is acceptable behavior. We cannot allow this to be normalized.

Facebook pages, such as Somers Parents, are wonderful tools for communities to connect and communicate, and they can have a positive and impactful role in our lives. Unfortunately, pages such as this are also used by some people to whip up mob support, where people seem to measure their value by the outrage that they can generate, and where anger and vitriol quell opposing thought and genuine discussion.

After the volume and intensity of their outrage has discouraged people from voicing a differing opinion, a thread on the Facebook page becomes a place where the only people who opine either agree, don't know better, or are simply bored and enjoy a pile-on.

We provided substantive information to people who asked, detailing the reasons behind our decisions. Rather than share the information we provided, to let people hear both sides of the issue, our responses were instead simply dismissed generally as "resistance" to their point of view. From this, it became clear that there was no desire to have a discussion of the issue on the threads. Instead, the threads became an echo chamber where no exaggeration, mischaracterization, untruth or crazy conspiracy theory was challenged.

In direct response to being told of today's meeting, it was posted on Facebook that the Board NEVER intends to open the courts. It is nonsensical to claim or think that, for some reason, we want any park facility to not be used.

I want to be clear; I am not saying that people are wrong to want the basketball courts reopened. We want them opened. It is also fine and acceptable to disagree with our reasoning, not everyone on the Board has the same position.

I am also stating firmly that people are entitled to ask questions, to write and call to voice their opinions and displeasure; to show up at public meetings and voice their displeasure. We all want that right. What I am saying is to say that whether we are elected officials, civil servants, or volunteers, we have a right to expect civility, to not be harassed and have our personal and work information not posted, to not have our words mischaracterized. That is true everywhere, but I would think that people would be more protective of civility in smaller towns, in closer communities, such as Somers.

I do not want to color all people who have weighed in on this issue as behaving poorly. For all who think that this does not apply to them, you are probably right, a majority of the people were civil and appropriate throughout the process and their interest and contributions to the dialogue are truly appreciated by the Board.

A frustrating aspect of this is that all the churn and negative energy, was unnecessary. At the March meeting, the Board decided to follow the county health guidelines and keep the rims down. We committed to re-visit the issue at the next meeting and further committed to hold a Special Meeting on the issue should circumstances change. At the April meeting, held on May 5, the issue was narrowed down to one of monitoring and we committed to try to find a resolution. Two days later, a proposal addressing the monitoring issue was circulated to the Board for its consideration.

If the proposal passes tonight, and we vote to recommend to the Town Board that the rims be returned, it will not be because of the nastiness. It will be because the Parks Board worked the issue, as it works all of their issues. People volunteer for this Board because they know that these services are important to the Town and we want the parks and facilities to be used as much as they can be safely used. Thank you.

Okay, what we are going to do now is that the Board will discuss the proposal to open the basketball courts and what steps are entailed. We had extensive discussions and input from the public last week, we are familiar with the proposed changes by the CDC and Steve Ralston had lengthy discussion with the WDOH. As such, we will not entertain discussion from the public during this part of the process.

Thereafter, we will vote on the proposal.

While we are hopeful that the vote will render moot many comments and questions, anyone who wishes to speak will be given an opportunity, as after the vote, we will open the meeting up to public comment.

Parks and Recreation Board member Stephen Krug read aloud the proposed solution:

- Parks and Recreation will hang signage around the courts stating the guidelines required for participating in a high-risk sport and asking patrons to “register” with the Parks and Recreation Department.
- Anyone that desires to use the courts will simply need to send an email to parks@somersny.com with their name, email, and mobile phone number to be “registered” with the Department.
- The entire need for this registration system is to have a means of communicating with those who desire to regularly use the courts and to help them “self-regulate,” informing them that repeated non-compliance could result in the courts being closed again.
- During the hours in which the park is staffed:
 - The monitoring of the courts will be done by park staff when available and “self-monitoring” as is the case with other areas of the park.
 - In addition, we will rely upon the repositioning, if necessary, of the park surveillance video to assist staff in observing the activity on the courts.
- During off-hours, 3:30pm-park close:
 - We will continue to utilize the properly positioned surveillance video to monitor activity on the courts.
 - In addition, we will respectfully ask the Somers Police to make a few extra drive-by appearances, specifically geared toward the court usage.
- Each day the off-hours video surveillance captured will be spot-checked/reviewed by either park staff, or if necessary, Board members or other volunteers.

VIDEO SURVEILLANCE APPROACH:

- Should the surveillance video capture violations that require action to be taken, a communication will be sent TO ALL REGISTERED USERS with a “warning system” geared towards curbing the behavior.
- Repeated refusal to ignore warnings and disregard stated guidelines would result in the courts being closed down temporarily or, if necessary, longer.
- The “registered users” will be somewhat based on an honor system; however, if only a dozen people register and 30-40+ people continue to show up, we will send a warning about the need to register, or we close the courts.
- Yes, there will be fake names and numbers, and not everyone will register, but the point is we have some means of monitoring and communicating.
- In fact, by using video surveillance, we even have the ability to identify those who repeatedly ignore/disregard guidelines and can deal with them directly.
- This solution is subject to modification or repeal as Covid-19 circumstances warrant.

Mr. Westerman entertained comments and questions from the Board members.

BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS

Mr. Penzine – If a violation is discovered, how many warnings will there be?

Mr. Krug – That will have to be discussed. It will really be dependent on how serious the violation is.

Mr. Westerman – Superintendent of Parks and Recreation Department Steve Ralston will have full discretion concerning violations.

Mr. Ralston – The last thing I want to do is to have to close the basketball courts. Hopefully the residents will be happy with the solution and will comply as it is in their best interest to make sure everyone is following the rules.

Mr. Westerman – Not only do we want the participants to follow the rules, but to also be safe. He also said that video camera monitoring is necessary as providing someone to be physically present to monitor the courts cannot be done due to budgetary constraints.

Mr. Zattola would like both the participants and their parents to receive emails about issues so the parents can be responsible for handling the outcome with their youth, not the Parks and Recreation Department.

Mr. Penzine hopes that since the parents fought so hard to get the courts re-opened, that they will prevent their children from participating if they were a violator.

Mr. Boniello would like to leave all the options on the table to wait as well as see if something happens and then deal with it.

Mr. Krug said the goal is for the honor system to prevail and not to get anyone in trouble.

Mr. Ralston said this is all about self-accountability for the user, while following the WDOH rules, which is not difficult to do.

Mr. Penzine said we want the basketball courts to be used and the rules followed.

Mr. Westerman wanted to be sure that all of the Board members were okay with video monitoring play and they were. He would like Mr. Ralston to have the authority to monitor and deal with any situations. Emailing the parents and the participants makes sense so the communication is clear. Mr. Westerman is happy that Mr. Ralston is okay with working within the solution guidelines and will enforce the same.

A motion was made by Mr. Krug and seconded by Mr. Zattola to recommend that the Town Board approve the solution presented so that the basketball courts in Reis Park can be re-opened. All were in favor.

Mrs. Sanz is available to help in any way she can. Mr. Penzine can do so as well.

Mr. Ralston said that what is recorded on the camera can only be viewed on their computers in the office.

Mr. Zattola reminded everyone that the cameras were installed because of vandalism in the Park, not to spy on people.

Mr. Garrity expressed his thanks to the Parks and Recreation Board for their due diligence in dealing with less than a great circumstance. They are all volunteers and should not be treated badly by people in the community.

Mr. Westerman entertained any comments from the public.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Ken Mitchell would like to set the record straight. This all started over poor communications and he would like the Board to take ownership of that. His wife sent an email asking what solution the Board came up with and there was no response. They were never made aware of the fact that a solution was determined and would be discussed at a Special Meeting this evening. He also resented that the Board asked those concerned to come up with a solution.

Mr. Westerman expressed his unhappiness with mobile number and work email being posted on the Somers Parents Facebook page, with people being urged to bother him. After it was denied that this was done, Mr. Garrity reported that as an administrator for that Facebook page, he confirmed that this posting happened and that he personally removed Mr. Westerman's personal information, because it was an inappropriate post.

Mr. Penzine said we did not ask for the concerned group to come up with a solution. We wanted all of you to be part of the solution, not the solution. He went on to say that he has been on the Board for over 20 years and has never been witness to the way Mr. Westerman was treated. Clearly tact and diplomacy doesn't exist. Mr. Westerman deserves an apology.

Kelly Mitchell said this is not about us versus you. This started as an email to Mr. Ralston about the solution that was not responded to. She went on to say that she did not post Mr. Westerman's personal information and Mr. Westerman agreed that it was not her. She did though post the email sent with the questions she had. Mrs. Mitchell ended by saying she has been working very hard on resolving this issue. This is not about not following the rules and not getting our way.

Michael Miskiewicz, a former Basketball Commissioner with SYSO said everyone should learn from this and communicate in a more fluid manner moving forward. He complimented the Parks and Recreation Board for the way in which they handled the situation.

Mr. Papalia hopes that the parents will use their excitement to impress upon the children the importance of following the rules.

Mr. Penzine complimented his colleagues in coming together and working so closely to resolve the issue.

Mr. Westerman thanked Mr. Krug and Mr. Ralston for working so diligently to formulate a creative solution to a difficult problem.

Mr. Krug said it was a team effort and he thanked everyone for their help.

All his fellow Board members thanked Mr. Westerman for his great leadership.

A memo will be sent to the Town Board with the Parks and Recreation Board's recommended solution to re-opening the basketball courts in Reis Park.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:50 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

