

CITY OF NEWTON

IN BOARD OF ALDERMEN

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES COMMITTEE REPORT

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 25, 2001

Present: Ald. Parker, Merrill, Tattenbaum, Johnson

Absent: Ald. Gentile, Sangiolo, Baker, Coletti

Also Present: Fran Towle, Bob DeRubeis, Stephanie Pelkowsky, Sheila Butts, Karen Prince, Judy Dorr, Carol Stapleton, Mary Brown, Sandy Pooler, Mike Rourke

#40-01(2) PROGRAMS AND SERVICES COMMITTEE requesting a report on the status of repairs and improvements to the Newton Commonwealth Golf Course.

ACTION: HELD 4-0

NOTE: The Committee was joined for this discussion by the Chairman of the Commonwealth Golf Foundation, Frank Rice. He presented the Committee with some bad news about the golf course. He said that at the previous meeting he was able to report that he was optimistic about when repairs would be completed. He now is not optimistic. Ten to twelve greens were severely damaged over the course of the winter by snow and ice conditions and six to seven of them he categorized as being 100% destroyed. Sixteen golf courses around the area have similar conditions based on the weather patterns that were present this winter. He said that there are two potential solutions to these problems. One is the band-aid solution with temporary greens and that would have continued play on courses right now. The current decision is to adopt the band-aid approach and to let a play continue on the entire course since other courses are closed for repairs. The other alternative would be to close the entire course temporarily to effect repairs. The seventeenth tee had underground drainpipes that got in the way of moving the tee and that hole will be playable, hopefully June 1 and five holes are in real trouble. The pond has a leak and also he thinks to effectuate these repairs, they will need a golf course architect, but while they have requested that that go out to bid, the City's Purchasing Agent for the past five years has failed to put that out to bid and he thinks it is because it fell through the cracks, but he is not very happy about that.

Ald. Johnson asked whether all the courses could get together to pool their resources to get an architect. Mr. Rice said that no, Newton needs our own architect because we need our own plan for the next ten years. He also added that while course is being used by temporary greens, there will be a need to cut rates, he thinks, by \$5.00 per round of golf to compensate for the fact that the play will be up to its usual standard.

Ald. Merrill suggested that the course be fixed now, that we should take a long-term approach, not a quick band-aid solution and if necessary the course should be closed during the repairs.

Mr. Rice promised to come back with further information as it became available and Ald. Johnson moved hold which motion prevailed unanimously 4 in favor, 0 opposed.

Re-appointment by His Honor the Mayor

37-01 WALTER BERNHEIMER, 75 Winslow Road, Waban, re-appointed as a member of the PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION, effective 1/1/01, for a term to expire on 1/1/04 (60 day Board action date 4/6/01)

ACTION: APPROVED 4-0

Re-appointment by His Honor the Mayor

39-01 WILLIAM RYAN, 163 Pearl Street, Newton Corner, re-appointed as an Alternate member of the PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION, effective 1/17/01, for a term to expire 1/17/04 (60 day Board action date 4/6/01).

ACTION: APPROVED 4-0

NOTE: The above appointments to Parks and Recreation Commission have been in before Programs and Services during this current term and, therefore, in accordance with the Committee's policy not to have the same person in twice during a term were ready to be approved. Ald. Johnson moved approval, which prevailed unanimously 4 in favor, 0 opposed.

Parks & Recreation Department Budget

The Parks and Recreation Commissioner then presented their budget. Commissioner Towle said that she was told by the Mayor's office that they needed to prepare a plan that would absorb a cut of over \$61,000. They observed that by minimizing seasonal staff. They also eliminated three positions and reallocated the money to contracting out to do maintenance. They are reallocated to the grass contract, the building contract, into equipment contract, turf control, and overtime and to compensate for some of the \$61,000 cut added \$5.00 per session to the camps.

Ald. Merrill said that he is surprised that they have been able to do as much as they have with what they have. The Committee opened discussion to public comment.

Doug Dickson, 17 Oxford Road, a member of the Newton Conservators spoke first. He said he is concerned about the cuts in the Parks and Recreation Commission budget, not just the cuts this year, but in recent years that the reductions in staff and funds have already put the Department behind the eight ball in terms of maintaining public properties and that the allocations for maintenance of parks should be increasing and not decreasing. We end up spending more in the long-term when we allow our investments to deteriorate, the maintenance is needed to position the City to meet the needs of the community.

The next speaker was Burton Elliot, also of the Newton Conservators. He pointed out that there is no way around the fact that reducing the budget means reducing maintenance and that is the simple truth of the matter.

Michael Clarke of 38 Halcyon Road, also a member of the Conservators and an alternate member of the Parks and Recreation Commission, said that there have been complaints about safety in public fields, particularly by some of the leagues saying the fields are not even playable and that they are certainly not safe to play on. Historically, the budget has been stable, but there is an increasing amount of acreage of land that needs to be maintained, so the funds available per acre to maintain parkland in Newton has actually decreased. He also spoke with regard to the CIP and he said that the increase in demand for fields means that there are not enough places to play. The City needs to acquire more land and he suggested that Angino Farm could be a soccer field.

The next speaker was Michael Parker of 57 Maplewood Avenue. He is a member of the Newton South High School Baseball Team and a sophomore at Newton South. He said that last season only two of their eleven scheduled home games were played at Newton South due to the poor condition of the field caused by standing water and inadequate drainage. He explained that when it rains the field is unplayable for the following two weeks because it takes that long after a rainstorm for the water to drain away and the field to be repaired from the damage of the standing water. He said that the condition of the field hurts their ability to practice. It also hurts their team spirit which the principal is attempting to encourage because it doesn't let the other students attend the games. It makes it very difficult because they don't know until the last minute where they will actually be playing. Also, it impacts on other groups and organizations by taking over their fields on game days, disrupting the activities that are scheduled there. He asked that the drainage problem be solved at the Newton South High School field, so that the team can consistently play home games there.

Sandy Pooler, Chief Budget Officer, said that all the big departments were asked to make cuts because that is where the money is. The overall operating budget for the city departments has increased 3 to 3 1/2% over last year and that they had to pay for fixed costs such as negotiated salaries, electricity, etc. and they don't have a collective bargaining agreement. Because there is no collective bargaining agreement from most of the unions that are associated with the Parks and Recreation Department, that money is in budget reserve and so the actual Parks and Recreation budget will go up when that money is reallocated during the course of the fiscal year. Also, most of the snow and ice money and tree emergency money is not in the budget yet, making it look like a more significant cut than the reality. In fact, Mr. Pooler told the Committee that the Parks and Recreation Department isn't really going down, it is going up. That assertion was questioned by both Committee members and the public. Mr. Pooler assed that the Department had identified the least painful places to make cuts.

The next speaker was Deb Crossley of the League of Women Voters. She asked how much would have to be added to the budget to level fund it effectively. Chief Administrative Officer Mike Rourke said another \$150,000 or so would have been needed to continue to fund at a rate of inflation increase all the existing positions in the Parks and Recreation Department budget, but that some of that can be offset by major savings in watering with wells, but some of that can be increased by increased fees and savings.

Chief Budget Officer Pooler continued that hopefully they aren't losing any major pieces of the Parks and Recreation Department programs. Effectively what they are doing is readjusting staffing levels.

Michael Clavino of Waban spoke next. He asked if there were any appropriation in this budget or in the capital plan for acquisition of land. Chief Budget Officer Pooler said if the questioner was referring to significant parcels of land that would cost multiple millions of dollars, that kind of money is not available, but potentially smaller amounts of money might be available.

Mr. Dickson spoke again and pointed out that the Community Preservation Act is one way to raise funds for open space acquisition as well as affordable housing and historic preservation. He agreed that the Parks and Recreation Department has been creative, but the Department started the year behind the eight ball and he said either we needed to change our priorities and commit ourselves to preserving open space, giving that higher priority in the existing budget, or we will need other sources of public funds.

The next speaker was Jacqueline Parker of 57 Maplewood Ave. She said that Newton South ballfield is not even usable, let alone respectable as compared to the fields in other communities when Newton South plays in other cities and towns. They have beautiful fields that are well maintained and it is shameful for us to leave our athletic fields in such shabby condition, let alone not even usable.

Ald. Johnson asked what would be needed to get the Newton South High School Field into the CIP. The answer provided was there is a major drainage problem at the field and there had been some discussion between the School Department and the City to work together to fix the problem.

Ald. Merrill said the School Department shortfall has caused every other department to take a hit in this budget. That assertion was questioned, but the administration declined to comment on it. Chief Budget Officer Pooler refused to answer when he was asked whether the School Department budget crisis had caused the administration to bale out the schools at the expense of other departments. He said that he did not want to comment on that.

Ald. Tattenbaum said the majority of Newton voters voted to decrease state taxes on last November's ballot, so when we get a cut in state aid that hurts the community, we are effectively getting the cut in services that corresponds to the cut in taxes.

Ald. Johnson asked whether there were any other cuts in state aid other than the proposed reduction from last year's level of increase in Chapter 70 school aid. Chief Budget Officer Pooler said the preliminary cherry sheets issued included a slight increase in lottery aid because people continue to play the lottery, but that the Chapter 70 school aid is the most significant area.

Chief Administrative Officer Mike Rourke said there are fixed costs for operations and energy in Newton and other communities and they are going up more than Prop 2 1/2

allows. He said that other communities are using Prop 2 1/2 over-rides to deal with this problem and it may be time for new sources of revenue for Newton. While Chief Administrative Officer Rourke was answering a follow-up question about this point, Chief Budget Officer Pooler interjected to say that Chief Administrative Officer Rourke is not announcing a position of the administration, nor is Mr. Pooler announcing a position of the administration in favor of a Prop 2 1/2 override. He is merely observing that is one possible solution to the problem we are currently in.

The Committee then began its page-by-page review of the Parks and Recreation Department budget. The first significant change was a \$10,000 cut in seasonal personnel in the outdoor recreation area which we are told is a reduction from three to two staff working at Crystal Lake and Gath Pool and there was another \$20,000 cut in outdoor recreation activities, such as senior programs and summer camps.

There was also a \$15,000 cut in indoor recreation activity which had allowed Newton North High School Pool to be opened during the time period between when Gath Pool and Crystal Lake close and the Newton North High School Pool normally opens, there would be a month in between if this cut takes place,. there will be a month gap where there is no public swimming in Newton.

Carol Stapleton of the Parks and Recreation Department clarified that there are pre-season and post-season limited hours at Crystal Lake and Gath Pool, but that only goes up to the last Sunday in August so there would still be more than a month gap during certain hours of the day.

Commissioner Towle clarified that in FY2000 there was no time in which there was not public swimming in Newton, but under the proposed FY2001 there would be a one month gap during the month of September.

Judy Dore, also of the Parks & Recreation Department, discussed the item which is called "funtastics" in which 200 to 300 children participate on a Friday evenings every mont, which is broadcast live on public access cable. Fifth graders participate and it is a chance for them to meet each other before they start middle school. It currently takes place at the Hyde Community Center, but it was started about eleven years ago at The Hut in Newton Centre.

In the discussion of the next functional section, Ald. Merrill pointed out that Burr Park has been underfunded over the years. There is a cut of just over \$1,000 which reflects an assistant's responsibility being merged into a supervisor's position. The \$26,000 cut in the cultural affairs office is not actually a cut, because those funds are being added to the Human Services Department.

In maintenance of public land, three positions are being cut, totalling \$97,000, but that entire \$97,000 is being reallocated to various accounts that are contractual repair and maintenance accounts as described in the overview at the beginning of the department's discussion and at this point Chief Budget Officer Pooler clarified that the cut isn't really

a cut. He said that, "There is \$61,000 decrease in the use of general fund revenue to support the Parks and Recreation Department budget."

Ald. Merrill pointed out on one of the salary pages how little some of the laborer's are being paid, some under \$28,000 a year.

The snow and ice account was discussed next. This is a 90% cut, after the total FY2000 appropriation, which included a number of supplemental appropriations. Ald. Parker pointed out this account is routinely, severely underfunded forcing the Commissioner of Parks and Recreation to come back numerous times every year and that the seed money in this account was inadequate and had always been inadequate.

Chief Budget Officer Pooler said there were two things at work. First of all, there is a policy decision to keep this account low for oversight reasons, but (second) he admitted this initial amount was even too low, but there wasn't a lot of money for things and that is why it was being done this way.

The Committee quickly reviewed the revolving account. There were no motions to amend those accounts. The Committee then reviewed the Capital Improvement Plan.

CIP Discussion

Ald. Tattenbaum asked whether the restoration of the historic burying grounds is begun or whether there is funding for that. Chief Budget Officer Pooler pointed out that the Community Development Block Grant Program may put some funds in and there might be other grants available.

Ald. Tattenbaum asked if anything was being done for Wellington Park. Chief Budget Officer Pooler said that \$60,000 was appropriated this fiscal year, but it went be spent due to the tightness of available cash and he thinks it will be a high priority in the next fiscal year.

Ald. Johnson moved an amendment to the CIP to include a new item -- Newton South High School Field improvements to correct drainage problems into FY2002 with no estimate as to cost. That motion was approved 4 in favor, 0 opposed.

REFERRED TO PUBLIC FACILITIES AND PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

#510-00 ALD. GERST seeking a report from the departments of Public Works and Parks and Recreation on the operational status of water fountains in city parks and schoolyards.

ACTION: HELD

NOTE: This item was taken up because it related to a question asked with relation to the Capital Improvement Plan. The Parks and Recreation Commissioner handed out a chart of water fountains that need to be repaired and Committee members asked for further updates as more information became available (see attachment).

Ald. Johnson asked about the water fountain in Thompsonville and the Parks and Recreation Commissioner promised to provide further information at a future meeting on the status of this water fountain project.

Parks & Recreation Budget Discussion

The Committee then completed its deliberation of the CIP and discussed the overall reductions in the Department's budget.

Ald. Parker moved a resolution to the Mayor to restore to the Parks and Recreation Department budget the portion of the \$61,000 decrease in the use of general fund revenue to support the Parks and Recreation Department budget that was not made up in increased Parks and Recreation Department fees. In other words, the motion was to restore to the Parks and Recreation Department budget the \$61,000 "reduction in general fund revenue used to support the Parks & Recreation Department budget" referred to earlier by the Chief Budget Officer, less the amount of revenue generated by fee increases in the Department. The motion was then characterized as a way in which the part time worker position could be restored (which would be the right amount of money to do that), although the motion did not specify that would be the purpose to which those funds would be used.

Ald. Merrill, Johnson, and Tattenbaum all expressed ambivalence that they didn't have enough information on this so the motion prevailed with one in favor, 0 opposed and three abstentions, (Ald. Merrill, Johnson, and Tattenbaum) as an amendment to the budget.

Ald. Parker also raised the issue of tracking the effectiveness of the privatization of the three positions in the Parks and Recreation Budget. In other words, shifting that work from employee positions into contractual services. Ald. Parker suggested that the department work with the Committee to track the quality of the services that are being provided in terms of maintenance of public land.

Ald. Merrill suggested we schedule a meeting with the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner in the fall regarding the maintenance of public land. The Committee then decided to create the following docket item:

#113-01(2) PROGRAMS AND SERVICES COMMITTEE requesting discussion with Commissioner of Parks and Recreation regarding ongoing expenditures for maintenance of public land and other items contained in the Parks and Recreation Department FY2002 Operating budget, particularly with respect to the effectiveness of work being done that has been contracted out as of this fiscal year.

Ald. Merrill moved hold on #113-01(2) and approval as amended of the Parks and Recreation Department budget. (2 amendments – one to CIP inclusion of Newton South High Field work item and also the attached resolution) There was a straw vote taken of 4-0 on approval of Parks and Recreation Department.

REFERRED TO PROGRAMS & SERVICES AND FINANCE COMMITTEES

#140-01 HIS HONOR THE MAYOR requesting that the sum of \$25,000 be appropriated from Marathon Receipts for the purpose of conducting a safety audit of playground equipment at playgrounds throughout the City of Newton and making emergency repairs, as necessary.

ACTION: APPROVED 4-0

NOTE: Commissioner Towle joined the Committee for this discussion and Deputy Commissioner Bob DeRubeis of the Parks and Recreation Department who explained that the 25,000 would be split between about \$12,500 for the audit itself of how safe the equipment is in about 40 sites throughout the city and the other \$12,500 to effect the repairs.

Ald. Merrill asked why not spend all \$25,000 on repairs. Commissioner Towle said that without the audit, they would not know where the repairs are needed.

Ald. Johnson moved approval, which motion passed unanimously 4 in favor, 0 opposed.

REFERRED TO PROGRAMS & SERVICES AND FINANCE COMMITTEES

#141-01 HIS HONOR THE MAYOR requesting that the sum of \$25,000 be appropriated from Marathon Receipts for the purpose of purchasing new playground equipment at Burr Park and Weeks Park playgrounds.

ACTION: APPROVED 4-0

NOTE: This item to take the sum of \$25,000 and appropriate half to Burr Playground and half to Weeks Playground as seed money for playground repairs and new construction. Some money is privately fund raised to improve these facilities. Ald. Merrill moved approval, which prevailed unanimously 4 in favor, 0 opposed.

Respectfully submitted,
Ken Parker, Chair