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Community Preservation Committee

MINUTES

22 January 2014

Candace Havens
Director

The meeting was held on Wednesday 22 January 2014 at 7:00 pm in the second-floor community room at Weeks House, 7 Hereward Road, Newton Centre.

Community Preservation Committee (CPC below) members present: chair Joel Feinberg, vice chair Jim Robertson, Beryl Gilfix, Laura Fitzmaurice, Tom Turner, Don Fishman (arr 7:08 pm), Leslie Burg (arr. 7:15 pm), Dan Green (arr. 7:40 pm). Member Mike Clarke was absent.

Community Preservation Program Manager Alice Ingerson served as recorder.

Parks & Recreation Commissioner Bob DeRubeis and Open Space Coordinator Carol Schein also attended.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

After a motion by Don Fishman, seconded by Beryl Gilfix, the minutes of the CPC's 9 January 2014 public hearing and public meeting were approved by a vote of 6-0.

Ingerson then provided an overview of the process for fy15 budgeting, which should start soon. In contrast to the program's published fy14 goals, which were only about process, she hoped the program could aim to make substantive contributions to the long-term "desired outcomes" now being used to organize the City's annual budget, especially: vibrant, diverse community life; improved capital infrastructure; environmental sustainability; robust economic development; long-term financial sustainability; and community engagement.

Ingerson also reviewed draft updates to two reports she regularly posts on the program website: "currently available funds," including a list of anticipated future proposals intended to help the CPC think about reserving current funds for future uses; and the 5-year "funding forecast," with slightly more optimistic assumptions about state matching funds than she has used in the past.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

Farlow Park Pond & Bridge (Newton Corner, historic resources), CPA request \$476,780, total cost \$582,380

Keith Jones, chair of the Friends of Farlow Park, made the presentation. The Friends have been working on funding for this project since 2004. The current proposal has three components: 1. restore the historic pond; 2. build a new ADA-compliant bridge with a design that makes visual reference to the original historic bridge from 1888; 3. irrigate the abutting Underwood School Playground, which is used for both soccer and baseball. Project supporters hope that the pond, which will be only 18 inches deep, will freeze enough to allow ice skating.

Farlow was Newton's first City park. After an 1883 design by Boston Public Garden designer George Frederick Meacham and a different plan that included a baseball field, the final design was drawn up by City Engineer Albert Noyes in 1888. The park's grand tree lawns, pond and Adirondack or "twig" style wooden bridge made it a very popular from the late 19th through the mid-20th centuries. In the

late 1940s, the wooden bridge was removed, possibly because it had deteriorated, and replaced by a cement slab and chain link fence. The pond was drained later, perhaps in the 1950s, but the Friends of Farlow Park have not been able to determine why. Suggestions have included stagnant water and a prolonged drought that made it expensive to keep the pond filled with MWRA water.

The 2006 CPA-funded historic landscape report commissioned from Brown, Richardson & Rowe considered the pond and bridge the park's most dramatic and compelling features. A 2008-2012 CPA-funded feasibility study found an adequate underground water supply and water pressure for both the pond and a new irrigation system on the school playground. Borings determined that the pond's concrete basin was in fairly good condition. The proposed project would replace the antiquated, one-zone irrigation system at Underwood with a new, multi-zone system using well water, which project supporters believe would save the City a \$4,000 annually over using MWRA water. A review of 13 larger ponds near schools and playgrounds elsewhere in New England found no safety measures at those sites, and concluded that a restored Farlow Park pond would pose no significant safety issues.

Also on behalf of the Friends of Farlow Park, architect Jay Walter presented his preliminary design for a replacement bridge that would echo the historic bridge while meeting current accessibility and safety standards and using low-maintenance materials. Newton-based structural engineer Steven Siegel recommended a cast concrete span with stone cladding on the piers and poured-in-place concrete ramps.

CPC Comments & Questions

Don Fishman felt the current proposal addressed well many past concerns about this project.

In response to Laura Fitzmaurice, Commissioner DeRubeis said his department had no answer for how to deter geese from congregating in Farlow Park or other parks in Newton. Keith Jones thought that park visitors' dogs might accomplish this.

In response to several questions from Joel Feinberg about ice skating, Keith Jones and Jay Walter said that in addition to wheelchair access, the new bridge would be lower than the historic bridge partly to keep children from trying to skate under it. The new approach ramps would have to be about 10-15 feet longer than the existing ones.

Jim Robertson admired the tenacity and vision of the Friends of Farlow Park, and thought that if the proposed project were completed, it would be an asset to the City. He was also glad to see that the commitment to community fundraising had increased significantly between the pre-proposal and the full proposal. Dan Green wondered if the fundraising target could be set even higher, but acknowledged the challenge of attracting users and funds from throughout Newton for a park near a commercial area and a major roadway. He also suggested reducing costs by using synthetic rather than natural stone the bridge piers. Feinberg urged the Friends of Farlow Park to become an official 501 (c) 3 nonprofit, so the donations it collects will be tax-deductible.

Robertson felt that the proposal's \$690 estimate for annual operating costs was too low. Jones explained that volunteers would clear debris from the pond basin when it was drained twice a year. DeRubeis said the pond and bridge should have little impact on his department's existing costs for grass cutting and leaf removal in the park. The department's annual operating budget includes funds to maintain and occasionally replace its existing 19 water pumps. A new pump costs about \$10,000.

Public Comments & Questions

Andreae Downs, on behalf of the League of Women Voters, thanked the CPC for its dedicated service.

The League felt the proposed Farlow Park project would benefit the surrounding neighbors, churches, schools, hotel and the abutting Evans Park assisted living community. They felt the proposal needed more detailed information about costs and funding for maintenance; about the Friends of Farlow Park as an organization; whether an irrigation system for the school playground was necessary and how construction of that system would be managed.

Steve Carter, who lives next to the park at 48 Eldredge Street, opposed restoring the pond because he believes it will not be well-maintained. The pond was drained before he moved to the neighborhood in the 1950s. He distributed a newspaper article from the 1930s about a decision by then-Mayor Weeks to allow wading in the pond. He was concerned both about geese and off-leash dogs using the pond and hoped the list of permitted and forbidden uses would be clearly posted. He did not believe the neighborhood had been canvassed recently to determine whether there was consensus support for the project.

Pat Rand, who lives 3 blocks from the park at 17 Belmont Street, believed many neighbors who once supported the proposed project now opposed it out of concern for the safety of visiting grandchildren. She felt the pond would attract geese, displace grass now used for picnics, games of Frisbee®, etc., and would impose a maintenance burden on the Parks & Recreation Department. She felt ice skating was unlikely to succeed, since temporary rinks recently installed by volunteers in other parts of the City have seldom frozen solid enough for skating.

Sue Rasala, of 285 Tremont Street, appreciated the park's history and the hard work of the Friends of Farlow Park but also felt the proposed project was not the best way for this park to serve the community. She shared other speakers' concerns about safety, dogs and children playing in the pond, maintenance, and the loss of grass areas currently used by both children from the two nearby schools and by families. To illustrate the challenges of park maintenance and use, she showed photos of the small Victorian gazebo next to the Parks & Recreation Dept. headquarters in the park. After a painstaking restoration by the North Bennet Street School, the gazebo has since suffered from repeated vandalism, to the point where Rasala hoped it could simply be removed. Commissioner DeRubeis agreed that his staff's periodic repairs of the gazebo had been largely in vain.

Former Aldermen Stephen Linsky supported the proposal. Though he agreed that the park is currently used actively, he felt its historic, contemplative design made it unique in Newton. Since the bridge would have to be replaced soon, he thought that might as well be done in coordination with restoring the pond. He considered the 15% of project costs proposed to come from non-CPA funds significant but agreed that the Friends of Farlow Park should become an official 501 (c) 3 and should approach the Little League for donations.

Karnig Boyajian, who had lived at 34 Eldredge Street next to the park for 60 years, felt the time for the proposed project had truly come. He distributed a 5-page letter anticipating and rebutting many of the objections raised by previous speakers. In particular, he felt that if open water was seen as dangerous, every body of water in Newton would need to be drained or fenced. He felt the CPC should follow through on its earlier recommendation of planning funds for Farlow Park by recommending construction funds for the pond and bridge. Feinberg noted that the CPC's *Funding Guidelines* explicitly say that a CPC recommendation for planning or design funds does not imply a commitment to recommending construction funds.

Richard Belkin, of 149 Park Street, introduced himself as chair of the Newton Corner Advisory Committee for Newton's federal CDBG program and the former chair of the Newton Corner Neighborhood Association, both of which have supported funding for this project. He felt that this

neighborhood has received little help from the City of Newton, and that funding for Farlow Park would help to compensate for the negative impacts of the Massachusetts Turnpike's extension through the neighborhood in the early 1960s.

In response to previous speakers' questioning of neighborhood support for the proposal, Keith Jones pointed out the new petition with over 200 supportive signatures that had been included with the 2013 proposal. He also noted that Andrew Gluck, another member of the Friends of Farlow Park, was unable to speak in support because he had needed to leave the hearing early.

As no one else requested to speak on this proposal, Feinberg closed the public hearing.

Newton Highlands Playground (Winchester & Dedham Streets, recreation), current CPA request \$240,000 anticipated CPA construction request \$1,960,000, total cost \$3,511,000

Carol Schein made the presentation for funding final design and construction documents. She noted that the site is formally the Joseph Lee Playground, after the Boston philanthropist known as the "Father of the Playground Movement" in the late 19th century. The proposed project will re-energize an existing resource that has been under-funded and under-maintained. No other park within a mile offers similar facilities. Access and parking are difficult. The park has no clear entrance from either Winchester or Dedham Streets. Parking is along the City side of the 50-foot-wide private way (Upland Avenue) behind the buildings at the north end of Winchester Street. The park's playground equipment was recently removed because it was outdated and dangerous; new equipment included in the master plan is designated for private funding. The park's playing fields have wet, heavy soils and a broken underdrainage system. The park currently has no pathways, benches, bike racks, or bubblers.

In 2007, after three heavily attended public hearings, the Parks & Recreation Commission approved a new, CPA-funded master plan to reconfigure the play area and fields for better use and add trails to the 40% of the site that is wooded upland. The private football, soccer and baseball leagues then contributed \$30,000 to a study of existing conditions to confirm that the new plan was feasible. DeRubeis noted that this site was the top priority in his department's overall 2005 ranking of parks projects throughout the City. Improvement of this site is also listed as a priority in the *Open Space Plan*. Although there was strong neighborhood and park user support for the project in 2007, DeRubeis stated that the department intends to hold an informational meeting in the future to update the community and the ward aldermen about the project.

CPC Comments & Questions

Leslie Burg, Don Fishman, Tom Turner, Laura Fitzmaurice, Beryl Gilfix and Dan Green all agreed that this site should be reclaimed, to meet the needs of the community and particularly children.

Green suggested that because of the site's relationship to the culverted Stearns Brook, the Conservation Commission might need to review the project. Though she did not believe that was the case, Schein said she would clarify this with that Commission's staff.

In response to Feinberg, Schein agreed that the surrounding area should be studied for ways of making this site safely accessible for children on bicycles. She and said that work would be coordinated with the work of the Planning Department on other pedestrian and bicycle improvements to the Needham Street corridor.

In response to Fishman, DeRubeis explained that the master plan involved replacing the current lights used for night games with newer, 50-foot ones that will spill no light sideways into the neighborhood,

much like those recently installed at Lyons Field in Auburndale.

In response to Green and Fishman, DeRubeis and Schein agreed that the site's current parking challenges might be exacerbated with new facilities and more intensive use. The master plan includes a small additional parking lot with 20 new spaces.

Feinberg asked whether this site really needed tennis courts. Schein said elimination of some courts had been discussed during the 2007 master planning process, but the user survey clearly showed that people who used these two courts wanted them to remain. DeRubeis felt that at least 35-40 of the City's 71 tennis courts were definitely needed, but others should be reviewed because the department simply cannot afford to maintain them all. Turner agreed that deferred maintenance of parks was a serious City-wide problem.

Green and Robertson were glad to see the significant amount of funding from non-CPA sources mentioned in the proposal, especially from sports leagues. Robertson noted that the proposed synthetic field (to be installed without CPA funding) will have to be replaced periodically and asked for a more detailed maintenance and replacement budget. Byron "Buzz" Dunker, representing some of the sports leagues, noted that the leagues knew they would have to cover those costs. As an example, DeRubeis explained that the Boosters at Newton South had set up a \$200,000 fund toward the future renewal or replacement of the synthetic field there.

Feinberg noted that, although the current funding request is only for design, the CPC was really thinking about the entire project. He asked that the construction cost estimates be updated prior to the working session. In particular, he noticed that the proposal included two different estimates for the Little League field: \$525,000 vs. \$475,000. Schein felt the higher number was more accurate, but promised to resolve this discrepancy.

Public Comments & Questions

Buzz Dunker conveyed support for the proposal from all of the sports leagues that use the site. The soil on the site is currently so compacted as to make the site almost unusable. Every time it rains, sheets of plywood must be put down over the mud. Every league has pledged to do significant fundraising for the project.

Robertson wondered why more of the proposal's community supporters had not attended the hearing. Schein explained that the Parks Dept. had received 20 new letters of support in the last few days leading up to the hearing.

Because the representative of the League of Women Voters had to leave the hearing early, Feinberg summarized their written comments. The League supporting preserving the wooded part of the site for passive use and agreed that artificial turf and new lighting would allow more intensive use of the playing fields. However, they felt the proposal was unclear about several issues, including whether CPA funds would be sought for playground equipment (contrary to the CPC's current stated funding guidelines) or to cover all construction costs; which businesses as well as sports leagues had committed to support the project financially, and in what amounts; how parking would be improved and managed; and the extent of neighborhood support for the project.

At this point, the hearing was closed.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Procedure and Issues for Working Sessions/Funding Votes

Feinberg asked the Committee to think about how they would like to approach scheduling the working sessions and funding votes for the current proposals once the public hearings had been held on all the proposals. Perhaps the working sessions could be completed in fewer than the full three meetings needed for the hearings, since thanks to their pre-proposal discussions, each working session would be the Committee's third or fourth discussion of that proposal.

In response to Robertson, Ingerson agreed that the Committee could move quickly to funding votes for any proposals on which Committee had a clear consensus and did not need further information. Burg suggested that at the end of the next meeting, the Committee take a straw vote on all current proposals and finalize its requests for any additional information it wanted each sponsor to submit prior to that sponsor's working session. Feinberg, Robertson and Burg agreed that a combined discussion of all current proposals would help the Committee consider whether some current proposals should not be funded, so current funds could be reserved for future proposals.

Feinberg wondered whether the CPC should make written commitments to fund future maintenance a precondition for its funding recommendations. Burg was especially concerned about maintenance for Farlow Park, though she and Robertson agreed that a restored Farlow Park would be a beautiful and appropriate setting for the Parks and Recreation Department headquarters. Feinberg and Turner both doubted that, despite the intentions of the current Friends of Farlow Park, any commitment to volunteer maintenance of the pond would fade after a few years. Ingerson characterized the vandalized gazebo as an object lesson in the challenges of maintenance and stewardship at this site.

Feinberg asked the Committee to consider whether, as a precondition for a CPA funding recommendation, it would be fair or feasible to require the Friends of Farlow Park to raise an endowment or reserve fund for maintenance, which was always harder to fund than one-time improvements. Ingerson thought that several other small, restricted-purpose funds managed by the City might be precedents for this approach.

Ingerson also thought that the Friends of Farlow Park had not yet approached nearby businesses about financial support. Robertson wondered if the abutting assisted living facility or the nearby hotel might consider extending its own arrangements for landscape maintenance to include Farlow Park. Other members suggested that businesses might support the park through Newton's Adopt-a-Space program. Ingerson noted, however, that the Parks Dept. was usually careful to ensure that each adopted space was designed so the department could maintain it adequately at minimal cost if (or more often, when) the space was abandoned by its "adoptive parents."

The meeting was adjourned by committee consensus at 9:30 pm.