

The stated meeting of the Recreation, Parks, and Open Space Advisory Committee of Abington Township was held on Wednesday, March 22, 2023, via webinar with Commissioner Vahey presiding.

CALL TO ORDER: 7:01 p.m.

PRESENT: Township Representatives: Commissioner Vahey, Director of Parks & Recreation Karl Lukens

Simone Collins Landscape Architects: William Collins, Principal, Sarah Leeper, Project Manager, Emma Haley, Registered Landscape Architect, Pat Stasio CPRP

Committee Members: Leah Anderson, Tim Barton, Krystn Kuckelman, Rachel McNeill, Karin Rosen, Steven Sacavage, Mike Scotese, Joe Stevens

CONSIDER APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Commissioner Vahey made a MOTION, seconded by Ms. Kuckelman to approve the minutes from the Recreation, Parks, and Open Space Advisory Committee Meeting of January 9, 2023.

MOTION was ADOPTED 9-0.

NEW BUSINESS:

Recreation, Parks, and Open Space (RPOS) – Advisory Committee Meeting #4 – Draft Plan Review:

Ms. Haley said focus group meetings were completed along with key person interviews noting two more will be held with reps from the School District and Abington Hospital. Survey will close on March 31, 2023, and 1,147 responses were received to-date. Analysis to be refined includes benchmarking the Township with its peer communities as well as against national recreation facilities; staff and maintenance needs; and the Township's athletic fields.

Ms. Leeper presented the vision, goals, and objectives with recommendations for each vision including focus areas, priority, identifying partners, and funding opportunities.

Vision #1 – Preserve & Enhance Environmental Resources with the goal of identifying strategies to restore function to Township’s natural systems, and recommended is to negotiate with private landowners to preserve open space lands via land conservation easements; negotiate with private landowners to develop, strengthen and protect riparian corridors; identify remaining properties for FEMA/PEMA buyout on official map; define park sites active recreation and passive preserves; and coordinate park branding with watershed education.

Commissioner Vahey said there are parcels purchased by the Township that are extremely passive one being the strip on Baeder Road where the trees between the previous homes are still there, which is passive open space that we could focus on.

Ms. Leeper replied we will explore that further.

Vision #2 - Steward Park/Preserve Stewardship Plans with the goal to ensure that the Township Park system meets current and future community needs addressing all ages and abilities, and recommended is to develop park/preserve stewardship plans; identify parcels for acquisition to meet future recreation and open space needs on official map; acquire current park land or secure long-term lease; and develop/update park master plans.

Vision #3 - Improve Multi-modal & universal access to parks and recreation amenities with the goal to develop access to parks to ensure that the Township park system meets community needs for all ages and abilities, and recommended is to identify trail corridors on official map; plan for future trail initiatives noting that a feasibility study is recommended for the Fairway/Valley Road side trail; access improvements to and within parks; provide ADA accessibility to all park features and amenities; provide ADA surface trail loop system in larger parks; resurface existing walkways; develop inclusive playgrounds; and standardized park/preserve signage.

Commissioner Vahey questioned whether rights-of-way could be shared with SEPTA to make future trail initiatives easier.

Ms. Leeper replied that SEPTA’s corridors tend to be narrow and elevated, so running a trail along there may not be feasible, however through redevelopment, there would be opportunity to get an established trail along the Fairway.

Vision #4 – Create New Recreation Facility & Programs Opportunities with the goal to sustain and expand municipal recreation facilities & programming and recommended is to develop additional neighborhood playground opportunities; convert Alverthorpe wading pool into a splash pad; redevelop pool facilities; and develop community building feasibility study.

Mr. Stasio said regarding field programming and usage; information will be forthcoming on how to require a permit for the fields to ensure maximum use for the maximum number of users without damaging the fields, and when they are not in use, what recreation programs could be provided. Also, how can we assure that everyone has equal access to the programs as well as opportunities to participate, and he recommended that a written policy be put in place so that residents could be vetted to determine whether they qualify for scholarships or reduced rates.

Vision #5 – Refine Administrative Procedures for the Township Park, Recreation & Open Space System with the goal to identify sustainable management maintenance, funding and communications about park and recreation resources, and recommended is to organize and consolidate local knowledge base to develop a Stewardship Department; increase staff and parks & recreation resources to meet department needs; develop and implement annual improvement schedules; upgrade parks and recreation programming software; coordinate website and social media to publicize programs; appoint an Open Space Advisory Committee to coordinate and prioritize plan implementation with Parks and Recreation staff; and formalize maintenance partnerships with youth sports groups.

Mr. Stasio said regarding increasing staff to meet department needs; we will evaluate work requirements of maintenance personnel and whether they have enough staff hours as well as in-house equipment to perform all necessary tasks. Recommendations will be made on staffing changes, if necessary, to keep operations running smoothly.

Regarding some of the older parks and playgrounds; there does not seem to be a system in place for evaluation and replacement of playground equipment, which has a 15-year lifespan, and the same goes for field and court resurfacing, so there would be an accurate determination for future use.

Also, we will review the recreation software package making sure it can track all data and coordinate information so that residents can find it in one place, and whether registration is user-friendly. The new system could also integrate sports data group in assigning fields and permits, monitor the use, and show all preservable spaces such as pavilions, etc.

Another recommendation would be a Memorandum of Understanding that would define responsibility of the youth groups, the School District and Township to assist the Parks & Recreation Department.

A composite map combining recommendations of existing lands were presented.

Mr. Collins said every idea will have at least one or two sources to apply for funding and the goal is to develop a strategy, although we do not know what the priorities are at this time. Once projects are prioritized, we can then match them with funding sources when those programs become available for application.

Ms. Leeper added that the Township may want to pursue an earned income tax open space fund, which would be done by referendum followed by an ordinance that would authorize the Township to increase the earned income tax up to 1.0% to be used exclusively for the purpose of financing purchases of open space.

Once authorized, these funds could be used for purchasing open space; transactional fees incidental to purchase; expenses necessary to prepare the resource; and recreation or land use plan. Annually, up to 25% of the fund may be used to develop and maintain property acquired through this fund and may be placed in the maintenance fund for this purpose and may not be used for development of buildings.

Commissioner Vahey clarified that funds cannot be used to maintain existing properties. Is that correct?

Ms. Leeper replied that is correct.

Mr. Collins continued that the Township would have an advantage in having their match in-hand as leverage when applying for State and County funding.

Commissioner Vahey questioned whether there is a time limit on holding the funds.

Ms. Leeper replied there is no time limitation.

Ms. Rosin questioned whether there would be oversight of the funding.

Ms. Leeper replied yes, it would be the same as other taxes.

Mr. Sacavage asked could a goal be set for the funding?

Ms. Leeper replied there could be goals within the community as to what it should be used for, but no legislative component defining what it will be used for.

Mr. Scotese asked about smaller trails that would just be a cut-thru that could have ADA accessible walkways, which may be helpful for neighborhoods.

Ms. Leeper replied those could be captured in the overarching recommendations relating to connecting parks to sidewalks and any specific ideas will be documented.

Ms. Kuckelman expressed interest in creating an Open Space Advisory Board to not lose momentum on our goals as well as consider getting creative on fundraising.

Commissioner Vahey replied that it should not be difficult to formalize a standard committee as parks should be a priority in which they have been previously underfunded due to budget constraints.

Ms. Leeper asked committee members to prioritize park projects for discussion/consideration at the next meeting.

Ms. Anderson suggested that one of the priorities for parks should be updating signage, which would indicate to the community that change is coming.

Commissioner Vahey agreed and noted that the Board of Commissioners are in favor of visible improvements to the parks, which makes everyone feel good about the work we are doing.

Mr. Sacavage commented that he is excited that the plan includes expanding open space as there are a lot of properties in need of focus and attention, and he likes the idea of a Stewardship Department.

Ms. McNeill commented that scholarship opportunities would have a positive impact for families to participate in programs; also, she likes bringing to light the need for ADA and inclusiveness and making it a priority.

Mr. Barton agreed that this committee should continue to contribute and make a difference. Also, he suggested looking into budgets for parks and recreation from the Township's neighboring communities for comparison purposes. And the prioritized project list should include a timeline.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Commissioner Vahey asked for any public comment.

Ross Able, resident, commented that he is excited about the trail connections. He expressed concern about how the earned income tax for open space would affect low income residents, although he likes the idea of being able to pursue these things. He questioned whether there were any discussions with SEPTA regarding the parcel on the southside of the station that was included in the Noble TOD plan.

Recreation, Parks, and Open Space Advisory Committee

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Ms. Leeper noted that the official map should reflect the TOD vision.

ADJOURNMENT: 9:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Liz Vile, Minutes Secretary