

Whittier Alliance Community Meeting on Washburn Fair Oaks Park

Monday, August 6, 2007 – 6:30pm-8:00pm
Washburn Fair Oaks Park, Southwest Corner

Present Nimco Ahmed (CM Aide), Henry Bromelkamp, Uri Camarena, John Champe, Erica Christ, Karl Cooper, Felino de la Pena, Verne Greenlee, Marcee Hansen, Paula Horan, Nancy Hotchkiss (AAUW), Jim Hruby, David Kortz, Tom Kremer, Brooks Mahoney, Pam Nordaune (MCAD), Dean Kallenbach, Jeff Nelson, Maurice McDonald, Jo Ann Musumeci, Becky Olson, Jesse Palmer, Paul & Nancy Lynette Railsback, A. Andrew L. Rogosheske, Robert Ranphal, Lynn Schultz, Alex Smith, Lisa Vecoli (MIA), James Wrayge

Speakers Robert Lilligren (Councilmember), Tracy Nordstrom (MRPB 4th District Commissioner), Mike Kimble (MPRB), Jon Gurban (MPRB Superintendent)

Staff Marian Biehn, Josie Shardlow, Eric James

Introduction

Marian called the meeting to order at 6:44 p.m. She thanked everyone for attending and commented that Fair Oaks Park has had several attempts at improvements over the years but that none have moved forward. WFOP has not had major improvement for sometime. The park is loved by neighborhood people and visitors but it is tired and unfortunately has a reputation for delinquent use. The park does get weekly maintenance. Marian said that Paul Hokeness, District Manager at the Park Board, indicated Washburn Fair Oaks Park (WFOP) receives regular maintenance of about 20 hours per week for mowing, litter pick up, etc. MPB representatives are here this evening to talk about feasibility of park improvements, budgets and to get neighborhood comments. There is \$50,000 of Whittier NRP money set aside for park lighting improvements but that is for all Whittier parks. Marian introduced CM Lilligren who facilitated the balance of the meeting.

Councilmember Lilligren introduced the speakers: **Tracy Nordstrom**, Fourth District Commissioner and Vice President on the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) Commission serving Calhoun-Isles/Central (includes Whittier), **Mike Kimble**, Community & Government Relations Coordinator at MPRB, and **Jon Gurban**, Superintendent of MPRB.

Councilmember Robert Lilligren

CM Lilligren recapped issues surrounding WFOP. These included crime, safety, and general improvements. When he was running for office and did campaign door knocking (some with Tracy Nordstrom), the WFO park was a topic of concern and interest to residents. He identified it as an area to work on during his term in office. The first two meetings were convened with 30 people including partners from Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA), Stevens Square neighborhood, Whittier Alliance, Hennepin History Museum, residents and property owners, etc. The discussion has now continued to include more people and neighbors. The CM said WFOP is a beautiful park but some components of it are tired. The discussion is not to change the essential character of the park and no pre-determined outcome has come of the previous meetings. He thanked all for coming and volunteering their time. Lisa Vecoli clarified MIA had attended the previous meetings but had no role in the planning of them.

Fourth District Commissioner Tracy Nordstrom

Commissioner Nordstrom said one of the first calls she received entering her park board position was regarded WFOP and Clinton Field. Per the Park Board WFOP is a "passive" park to relax/stroll and Clinton Field is an "active" park for play equipment and sports. She noted her recent trip to Alaska assisted her in understanding that Minneapolis has one of the best urban park systems in the nation. Three weeks ago, she along with the two other MPB members, toured WFO park and spoke with nearby residents. They understand WFOP is underused in the day time. It is an important neighborhood and city asset. The Park Board is currently undergoing a Comprehensive Plan Review and have been gathering public input with a goal for approval in 2007 and implementation in 2008. She encouraged the n'hood to wait on planning for Fair Oaks until the Comprehensive Plan is complete so there won't be any conflict between what the n'hood wants and what the Comprehensive Plan calls for. A resident asked if park police were included in the input surveys. Tracy said yes it was a big piece. Public safety was rated a very high priority. A resident noted the Park Board only received 1 percent response to thousands of requests sent to all households in Minneapolis. Superintendent Gurban replied they validated their data with a phone survey and held town hall meetings to review the accuracy of their response trends.

Park Board Superintendent

Superintendent Gurban noted they will be celebrating the 125th anniversary of Minneapolis parks soon. Peace Games are happening at Washburn Fair Oaks park on August 9th to gather the diversity of the city together which last happened year the Sculpture Garden. He noted Mike Kimble and himself are here to listen to the community's thoughts and ideas for the park. The WFO Park plan from 2001 was never adopted by the MPRB so at this time the plan is no longer valid. To implement any improvements a new plan would have to be drafted with neighborhood input.

The entire park system is 6400 acres with 180 parks. In the 20th century, the Park Board had a policy of duplicating the same facilities at all parks because the demographics of the city allowed for homogenous use and demand (i.e.: 1950s:

roughly 521,000 people, 98% white, ball parks in all parks made sense). The demographic have dramatically changed and one plan doesn't fit all. As a result, logistical challenges came to the Board in terms of upkeep and staffing. Improvements for all parks come from one capital budget which is less than a million per year. To avoid parks being under construction for many years, the Superintendent instead dedicated money to completing improvements within one year, limiting funds to 2-3 parks each cycle. Parks are also being specialized to their area's demand and this keeps repair costs low for underused facilities (soccer fields, baseball diamonds, etc). The budget is under stress and additional demand if a park also has buildings that need upkeep and capital improvements such as roofs.

The Park Board would like WFOP to maintain a low-key, less expensive approach and simply embellish the park in order to safely "pause and relax." Clinton Field Park is the active park meant for sports and play. Informal games at WFO are not discouraged however. They have and will resist building fences, back boards, etc. in FO park. On the current MPRB Comprehensive Plan, it states the number one priority as preserving green space in an urban environment and number two as safety. Currently no projects are pending for WFOP and there is also no financial structure to pay for any improvements. Should a new plan come through, it would be done pay-as-you-go and with Capital Long Range Investment Committee (CLIC) funds. WFOP is not on the CLIC agenda at this time.

Felino said the park belongs to the neighborhood and the Park Board should recognize this. But he suggested the immediate community around the park will take interest on improvements only if the Park Board makes initial investment in terms of security. He noted he was scolded by a policeman in Cuba for placing his foot on a park bench because Cuba does not have money to continually upkeep its assets and residents should care for their park.

A resident asked if the Nicollet Pedestrian overlay would affect the park. It will not but the park will be pedestrian and bike friendly as well as safe and usable for personal health reasons. A resident noted the park needs beautification and the historic significance needs to be returned and highlighted for educational purposes. Gurban noted the park should take advantage of its view of the skyline, usable grid system and lighting. However improvements must be done right the first time. The resident also wished for gardens. Gurban pointed to Loring Park as a park that once had all the "menu items" of a park and the residents came in and redid the park, eliminating fields in favor of gardens and bridges. He wants residents to be able to get away from all the technology of the day and sit and think.

A resident asked about the Avenue of the Arts. There is no plan or funding for the Avenue of the Arts along Third Avenue at this time. Gurban said he would like an artwork display system and take advantage of the area's talented local artists. CM Lilligren noted when he came into office the political climate changed and there was no longer support for the ATA which had traffic management issues. A resident said this is the neighborhood's chance for WFOP to become the new anchor for the Ave of the Arts. A resident lamented seeing this plan for the third time and no action has been taken.

Community & Government Relations Coordinator, Mike Kimble

Mike Kimble spoke about the 2001 plan. SRF Consulting assisted in producing the document. The plan kept the park mostly green with new pathways. It has interpretive features of where the Washburn Mansion previously was. The pond was put back into the park. 24th St E along the MIA is a convertible street for celebrations with a link to MIA with a terraced entrance. Lights, picnic areas and education nodes were included. The flavor of the park was essentially kept. There was also discussion of an amphitheater and garden area. In 2001 it was sent back to Planning Committee where it was put away. The project was \$2.1 million which would be \$2.5-3 million today.

An attendee asked if there was a possibility of MIA or the Walker donating money. Lisa said MIA would like a positive presence on the park but currently have no consensus of what should be there. MIA will not be coming forth with a plan and will wait until MIA is asked by the community to take a role if any.

A resident asked if Frederick Olmsted designed the original park. Kimble said he didn't know. Another resident suggested restoring WFOP back to its "original landscape" of native plants—pre Washburn home/park. Marian noted a book dating to 1914 shows park plans which were never done. In 1922, WFOP became public property.

A resident referenced the 2001 park plan and criticized the plan and the process. CM Lilligren removed the plan from the podium since it was already established that the plan was no longer valid. The resident suggested the current park functions adequately and does not need new lighting. He suggested security and safety is a function of how clean the park is, not lighting. He asked about changing WFOP to regional park status. Superintendent Gurban said regional park status allows new money pools to be taken advantage of and asks the region to share in the cost of the park because it may be used by everyone and not simply the immediate neighborhood. Minnehaha Park and Victory Memorial Drive are examples. The resident said regional park status would remove input of the residents altogether.

Felino said he crosses the park daily it is very important the park be illuminated enough at night and be a lively function for the community. After 9pm there is not enough lighting. There is also not enough police because there is not enough money to pay for them. A resident noted she has seen Park Police drive through and not get out of their cars when they

have seen suspicious activity. Powderhorn Park on the other hand is constantly patrolled. Police at the right time and right numbers will solve problems. Nancy Hotchkiss of American Association of University Women on the north end said they need a security officer to walk members to their cars at night. Their members are also afraid to come to their building for evening meetings.

A resident asked if trees will be chopped down. CM Lilligren said no, actually new ones may be added. The CM said this is the beginning of a series of meetings to decide on improvements if any are needed. A resident appreciated how Loring Park has changed. She suggested using clues from old surveys to find the native landscape of the park. Residents noted more vegetation and flowers would be inviting as well as a picnic and kids area. The Railsback said they haven't seen children using the WFOP and would like more kids here. Lisa reported kids have played on the dinosaur sculpture, recently breaking its tail. A resident liked the way the park is now though he would think twice before he let kids play unsupervised. At the moment he says a major problem is garbage, if there is no respect for what is currently there then there is no use in new plantings or flowers. The residents must begin at the ground up. A resident also voiced appreciation for Loring Park and its ease to walk through, though would not walk through at night still. He also agreed WFOP is not safe and said his college neighbor's cheek was slashed while riding his bike at night. A resident said lots of kids are using WFOP but play things can't be placed in the park. He suggested security is a matter of fear than reality.

A resident said he was mugged in the park before and said basic services such as trash cans were taken away until residents complained. He is concerned about the upkeep, mowing, and tree trimming. The Superintendent said the Park Police could not be present today because the entire force is on alert following the 35W incident. A resident asked if increased security could be included in normal maintenance. Gurban noted the Park Board is behind on some maintenance because of diseased tree removal. He noted that the trees have been limbed up and sight lines improved.

A resident lamented that nothing ever gets done and the Park Board has no plan. The neighborhood has no money save for lighting. The group is getting nowhere with no funds. She suggested using money for lighting for the meantime and wait for donations to come in. She is tired of meetings. The CM said part of the inaction is due to no clear consensus amongst the Park Board and the residents. MPRB did not want to go ahead with their plan and divided the community. It is possible to get CLIC funds but it is a lengthy process and an agreement needs to be made now for it to start.

A resident noted police calls are down recently for WFOP but it is still a "dirty park" with people sleeping under trees. Park Police also do not respond upon request. He said St. Stephens Church (note: Loaves and Fishes Program not St. Stephens) also plays a direct role and should be asked to either move their kitchen or shut down. St. Stephen's Church (Loaves and Fishes) is not doing their part in the community.

A resident voiced concern the park would become institutional with MIA's involvement and that renters were all dismissed as stakeholders from the beginning. The CM agreed noting the roughly 8,000 people who live in vicinity of the park were difficult to reach and involve. A resident commented that prior to Loring Park's improvements; Loring was much like FO Park. It's an entirely different place now. Another attendee stated they are grateful if the MIA is interested or can be helpful with funding. A resident said they preferred WFOP not become "Sculpture Garden #2" or "Target Park." Any improvements should be sensitive to the wild life in the park like the pair of Cooper Hawks.

The CM said he appreciates the 6th Ward for the unique arrangement of competing interests working for the community's improvement. The discussion was very helpful and reiterated this was an informal visioning session. He will continue to have open meetings and work with all parties to deal with immediate concerns. Commissioner Nordstrom noted she lives near Lake Calhoun and they have a difficult time getting as many people as attended this meeting to a meeting in her neighborhood and appreciates Whittier residents for the initiative. She asked the community to help leaders find out how to involve everyone. The CM said future meetings will incorporate Park Police and other parties.

Robert poised three questions for people to consider: What is it that you like about Fair Oaks Park? What would you change if anything about the park? And what would be the short and long term improvements/vision for the Park?

Meeting adjourned at 8:00 PM

Minutes submitted by Eric Fu-Wah James, Whittier Alliance.