

**OAK HILLS PARK AUTHORITY
MEETING MINUTES
March 4, 2014**

PRESENT: Clyde Mount, Chairman; Ernie DesRochers; Elsa Obuchowski; Paul Cifatte; Bill Waters; John McKenna; and David Hollar.

STAFF: Shelly Guyer, Executive Director and Ed Ruiz, Golf Pro.

ABSENT: Pam Works and Jim Schell, Superintendent.

INTERESTED PARTIES: Jim Downing, Doug Smith and Mark Curtain from Total Driving Range Solutions.

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Mount called the special meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. Mr. Mount proceeded to explain that the Oak Hills Park Authority had posted a draft of the strategic plan on the Oak Hills website on Friday, February 28, 2014 and was holding this special meeting to present a draft of the strategic plan and solicit public comment on it.

Mr. Mount stated that over the past six months Mr. DesRochers has collected input from the Authority Members, the Conservation office, the Recreation Department, has thoroughly reviewed the proposed 1998 Master Plan, has researched OH lease with the City and City Ordinance to determine the process.

Mr. Mount introduced the members of the Oak Hills Park Authority and the staff.

Mr. DesRochers stated he has looked forward to updating the Oak Hills Master Plan since he was asked to Chair the Ad Hoc Driving Range Committee a year ago when the Committee began preparing an RFP for a driving range. She noted that since that time the Authority has been making note of relative ideas to include in the new Master Plan.

Mr. DesRochers and Mr. Mount presented a summary of the Oak Hills Park, A Strategic Plan: A Road Map to the Future with an informational slide show that discusses the mission of the plan, current and proposed uses, and the history of Oak Hills.

Mr. Mount thanked Mr. DesRochers for the many hours and great effort he spent researching and preparing the draft of the Strategic Plan.

Mrs. Obuchowski asked that the Oak Hills Authority Members give comment prior to the public comment. Mrs. Obuchowski stated that she fundamentally disagreed with the stated primary mission to reflect the open space grant authorization of 1966, the Norwalk City code and the 1999 Master Plan. She stated three points she would like the document to include: details on how to improve the tennis facility, the restaurant and designate permanent open space in the park.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Guyer asked that public comment be kept to three minutes.

Rick Wetzel stated that he has been using the Sterling Farm golf range for years and Sterling offers a discount in the morning because the golfers have to hit into the sun. He stated that the proposed golf range at OH has a southern exposure and asked if the Authority is prepared to offer a discount. He stated that he believes the range design is intrinsically flawed.

Arron Karp stated that this is a really good plan and personally believes that the golf course is an asset to the community that attracts new residents which supports Norwalk business and increase the tax base.

Paul Cantor stated that Oak Hills is a public park not a perspective commercial enterprise. He asked that the OHPA make public the gross revenue of the driving range. He appealed to the taxpayers to help him end the driving range charade by the OHPA.

Yvonne Lopaur stated that the Park belongs to all and not just 11% of the community. She stated that in order to pay for the golf course the OHPA has taken out City loans. She noted that the driving range isn't what the majority of Norwalk residents want but OHPA doesn't view it this way and states in its opening paragraph that its primary mission is to become the recognized market leader in providing high quality golf rounds and practice to its target market.

Diane Keefe written statement was read. Diane Keefe wrote that she read the draft Strategic Plan that it woefully inadequately in terms of its analysis on how the OHPA will make the park economically viable. She stated that it does not evaluate alternatives but simply recommends one course of action which proposes to spend \$4 million to upgrade the facility and "involve the environmentalist". Ms. Keefe advocated for open space which requires no maintenance. She stated that she is not in favor of any form of public financial support to the golf course and asked OHPA to reconsider how it derives its revenue and instead focus on improving the restaurant business so to pay the debt down.

Barbara Frieler is pleased with the proposed golf driving range. She noted that she is a golfer but due to time constraints can't always play 18 holes. She suggested that the OHPA consider running two nine hole golf courses which she believes would double the golf and restaurant revenue. Ms. Frieler advised the OHPA that she also is a tennis player and the tennis facility is in dire need of bathroom renovations and the tennis facility is old and dusty. She stated that contacting someone to discuss the tennis facility was very difficult. She asked that the Fillow Street neighborhood stop using the grassy area as a doggy bathroom and the OHPA consider building a paddle ball court in that area.

Ray Kode stated that he liked the driving range proposal and noted that it is fresh look and he appreciates the time it took to put the plan together. He noted that the sun will be a factor due to the southern exposure of the range and it seems too narrow.

Nick Pizano noted he grew up walking and fishing at Oak Hills and doesn't know why it has to be designated as a park and feels it is a waste money to try to appease the environmentalists. He is happy with golf conditions, likes the driving range proposal and stated that the sun is high when in the south and won't be an issue. He asked that people not believe the naysayers.

Don Anderson complimented the condition of the golf course. He reported that he once owned the Golf Training Center and he knows that golf play is down so he is ambivalent about the driving range. He noted that youth programs are necessary to promote the game of golf and would like a place to warm up before he plays golf.

Kevin Kaine stated that he recommends that OHPA study the possibility of building a pool with a modest facility at Oak Hills because it is a great family activity. He noted that the OHPA should promote fiscal and safety and he does not support public funds to build a driving range.

Diane Lauricella noted that golf is a decent game but the drafted Strategic Plan does not offer enough recreational alternatives. She stated that she appreciates the dialog about nature learning center but she is not convinced that the public process was followed to the extent required.

A statement from Jerry Petricini was not submitted.

A statement from Sharon Taymor was submitted.

Bret Minieri stated that Norwalk has many mixed use parks but only one golf course and he'd like to keep the plan simple and the park to remain a golf course and tennis facility. He doesn't have a lot of time to play so he will drive to Sterling Farm to hit balls 30 times a year.

Stuart Garelick advised the group that if money is spent to build something in Norwalk then he'd like it to see the best job possible outcome. He noted that he doesn't use the other City facilities but other residents do and he would like the best possible golf course experience.

Scott Kimich stated that he is glad that the OHPA is open to expanding the park to other uses. He stated that his background is in market research and that golf rounds have been decreasing over the last 20 years for many reasons and changes in demographics. He suggested that the golf course be reduced to 9 or a 12 hole golf course.

Barbara Robinson stated that the parking needs to be increased.

Jane Rapp stated that OHP has always been a golf course and suggested that OH research Sterling Farm.

Kevin Caine inquired about the timeline on the approval of the Master Plan and building of the driving range.

Andy Garfinkle inquired as to how long the golf course would be under construction.

Diane Cece stated that OHPA had not followed the public process required to develop and approve a Strategic Plan or Master Plan. Ms. Cece reviewed the public and approval process required by the City to develop and the purpose of an RFP, Strategic Plan and Master Plan.

Chris Orle stated that he attended the meeting to support the OHPA and the Park. He noted that he strongly supports the Park as a golf course and tennis facility. He noted that Norwalk has enough amenities to please anyone who is willing to get out and try.

Missy Conrad appreciates the game of golf and was raised an environmentalist. She appreciates that OHPA has made effort to provide alternative uses at the park. She agrees that the land behind the restaurant should be dedicated as open space to preserve space for the animals and trees, and improve the air quality.

Paul Maciejewski stated that he is shocked to hear people complain about a sport facility such as a golf and tennis facility. He agreed that Norwalk has many recreational, play grounds, ball fields, bike lanes, beaches yet it is rare to hear a golf complain about these facilities or paying a fee to use them.

Joe Lazaro stated that he read the plan shared some observations: that increased revenue is not a given since golfers may not use a driving range and play on the same day, and some will only use the range or play; he noted that price increases eventually deter golfers and decrease rounds; his wife would like to play only 9 holes but does not want to play at 9 a.m; and approves of the building of 3 bathrooms at the golf course.

Nick Pizano noted that if the restaurant was a comfortable place, offered good service and with affordable food then the golfers would patronize it.

Diane Lauricella asked the OHPA to consider choosing environmentally safe chemicals (Audubon program) on the golf course to save money and the environment.

Hearing no additional public comment, Mr. Mount ended the public comment period.

Mr. Mount reported that the OHPA doesn't have \$25,000 to hire a consultant to write the RFP. He noted that OHPA has continually meet and taken public comment and the OHPA has drafted a plan that encompasses the public's ideas and concerns. He stated that throughout the six months OHPA has consulted with the City commissions and departments as required and will continue to follow the process as it seeks the City's approval for a new Master Plan. Ms. Cece responded that OHPA hasn't followed the process and insisted that OH is a public park not a golf course.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Mount thanked the public for their comments.
The meeting was brought to a close at 9:01 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Sheila Dravis