



CITY OF NORWALK
RECREATION, PARKS & CULTURAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL COMMITTEE
BY VIDEO CONFERENCE AND TELECONFERENCE

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 14, 2024.

REGULAR MEETING

7:00PM.



Members of the public may call in to participate. Callers will not be able to see the meeting participants. All participants will be muted upon entering the meeting. To speak, dial *9 on the phone and you will be called on by the host of the meeting during the public comment section. All speakers must state their name and address. Comments must be on a topic on the agenda and are limited to three minutes. Anyone disrupting the orderly conduct of the meeting, including by using threatening, hateful, or sexually explicit language, will be removed. Please find the information using the link above.



Members of the public who wish to “view the meeting live” and/or “provide live comments” can use the Zoom meeting platform. All participants will be muted upon entering the meeting. To speak, click the “raise your hand indicator” and you will be called on by the host of the meeting during the public comment section. All speakers must state their name and address. Comments must be on a topic on the agenda and are limited to three minutes. Anyone disrupting the orderly conduct of the meeting, including by using threatening, hateful, or sexually explicit language, will be removed. Please find the information using the link above.



Members of the public who wish to provide public comments are encouraged to submit those via email in advance of the meeting. For these comments to be read into the record, they must be submitted by 12:00 p.m. the day of the meeting. Please email Dilene Byrd at dbyrd@norwalkct.gov with the subject line “Public Comment” to provide written public comment prior to the meeting.

ATTENDANCE: Darlene Young, Chair, Heather Dunn; Lisa Shanahan; Douglas Sutton; Johan Lopez (arrived at 7:03PM)

ABSENT: Nicol Ayers

STAFF: Robert Stowers, Director, Recreation and Parks; Ken Hughes, Superintendent, Recreation and Parks

OTHERS: Bruce Cowans, MGT Consulting Firm; Ms. Patel, MGT Consulting Firm

I. ROLL CALL

Ms. Young called the meeting to order at 7:00PM.

At roll call there were five (5) committee members present. A quorum was present.

II. MINUTES OF MAY 8, 2024

**** THE APPROVAL OF MINUTES WERE TABLED.**

III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation this evening.

IV. OLD BUSINESS

There was no old business discussed this evening.

V. NEW BUSINESS

There was no new business discussed this evening.

VI. DISCUSSION

1. Fee Study presentation and discussion.

Mr. Stowers said there will be a presentation this evening on the fees and charges study. He said he believes fees and charges should be more around equity pricing and find out what the market will bear and give access to those that cannot afford it in other ways such as a scholarship fund or leaving spaces open in the programming, and the key is finding a system to use to make those adjustments. He said a market study of fees and charges was done by MGT Consulting Firm which they will be presenting this evening. He said the study will provide a sense of what we are able to charge and what the market will bear in our city. He said a very thorough analysis was done on cost to revenue which will help to make the decision when setting revenue goals.

Mr. Cowans presented and said that city staff had requested that they look at a few things which one was to detect the cost of the different program areas and compare them to current revenues to see how thoroughly they recover current costs. He said they also did a great deal of community engagement and received input for several hundred residences, and he is pleased to report uniformly people like the services that are being provided.

Mr. Cowans provided an overview of the project scope which included to determine cost of fee services and compare them to current prices, engage with participants, and discuss pricing strategies based on cost findings and community feedback.

Ms. Patel said they worked with staff from the Recreation and Parks Department to capture the 2023 expenditures, revenues, personnel data to identify some key program areas, as well as the administrative staff and identified all of the indirect expenditures as well as any program specific expenses to build the hourly rates for every administrative position and a departmental indirect cost rate and applied it to all of the staff costs and staff time allocations that they had received by program to calculate the costs for every program area and compared it the 2023 revenues. She said the industry norm is to recover approximately 25% to 30% of recreation service cost from fees and based on the calculations the average cost recovery included in non-fee related activities is approximately 23% so there is room for up to a 15% increase in fees in these program areas and still stay within industry range. Mr. Cowans added that the cost recovery varies quite a bit by program area.

Mr. Cowans said they spent a lot of time getting resident input and they thought the programs were of good quality and one of the questions that was asked to them was if fiscal pressure required some changes would they prefer the fees be adjusted or reduce the offerings and they would prefer fee increases to reducing their access to these services. He said they were also asked what range of increases that they thought was reasonable and the vast majority said up to approximately 15%.

Mr. Cowans said that Mr. Stowers had checked with the neighboring towns and found that Norwalk is in large less expensive than the peers. In closing he said people think the services are good and would rather accept some fee increases than adjust to financial pressures by cutting back on their access to these activities. He said they are recommending considering increasing fees up to 15% but may want to vary that by program area because in some areas are already over the 25% to 30% area so are areas that would not seek revenue from, and camps and parking are recovering a greater share of costs with parking being in a slight surplus. He said people expressed interest in some facilities improvements and would be willing to pay for that but he thinks that needs to be tempered with the understanding that if prices are being adjusted to reduce the drain on the general fund he is not sure how much more room there is for facilities improvements that are funded by fees, and the cost to refresh the facilities will need to be recognized in the financial statements. He said he thinks it would

be in the best interest to establish a cost recovery policy of at least 25% and also found there is room to increase communication of activities.

Mr. Lopez asked if there are any strategies that they have seen that worked in their experience that helps make a recovery program sustainable. Mr. Cowans suggested more publicity to generate demand and a policy not to charge full cost is an incentive to participate and there is a premises that if you live in a city there will be access to these amenities and would need to pay but part of the communication is that cost recovery is not intended to be fully from fees. He also suggested if there is a year that there was extra revenue putting it into an account to pay for the years that are softer which may help to make it a little more sustainable. Mr. Stowers said a lot of cities have set up a park fund and are able to generate revenue through other entrepreneurial initiatives without having to go back to the Common Council because the park fund would have the money in it and from those funds, they create a very healthy scholarship fund. He said they are also looking at a more equitable way of charging fees and their intent is to develop a scholarship fund for the summer camps and all the activities.

Ms. Dunn asked if there are any recommendations of specific areas where we should prioritize funding. Mr. Cowans said in his opinion he does not recommend touching the parking or youth summer camps as he feels the cost recovery on those does not need a current adjustment but suggested a 15% increase for indoor/outdoor sports would be acceptable to the public but would keep the price lower for aquatics for public safety reasons, and increase the facility rentals as well as the Mariana, moorages, and boat ramps. He said the total revenue is currently \$1.1 million dollars and if it is increased by roughly 15% would solve all the budget problems but will fund a few positions.

Ms. Young said that picnic grounds and table/park usage is the second most costly thing but generates very low revenue and asked if anything can be done. Mr. Stowers said that number includes some of the beach costs but there are some ideas being generated to have more picnic areas that can be reserved and having the beach staff work on other things that generate more revenue. Mr. Hughes said the cost of the park usage also includes all of the maintenance, so the number is somewhat skewed in terms of the cost because the site needs to be maintained whether there is an event happening or not.

Ms. Dunn asked if there is a way to differentiate when permits are given to profit or non-profit organizations/agencies. Mr. Cowans said “yes” and means testing ability to pay is unworkable. Mr. Hughes said there is currently a 10% discount for non-profit agencies.

Mr. Stowers said this is a draft report and staff welcomes any comments the members of the Common Council may have. Ms. Dunn said she would like to see how many people participate in each of the program areas.

Ms. Young asked if the number of survey participants gives enough of a well-rounded perspective to move forward with changes. Mr. Stowers said he thinks that the number of responses received makes the surveys valid, but the communities of color did not really respond as well but in his career has always been a challenge to get folks that may feel they don't have a voice to respond or participate but did have a substantial amount for this survey. Ms. Young said that Norwalk has over 90,000 residents and asked what that number comparatively looks like with the data that has been received. Mr. Cowans said based on the surveys received they feel they had a sense of the community from that.

Ms. Young asked how much lower Norwalk charges for programming compared to the surrounding towns. Mr. Stowers said that staff has done the research and know that Norwalk is lower, and they are presently updating those and when the final fee study is completed there will hopefully be some information included in it about that and when staff presents their recommendations on the fee increases/modifications that information will be presented as well. He provided an example and said for the cost of the summer camps Norwalk is in the 70 percentiles in terms of cost recovery but are probably 25%-30% below the surrounding cities in terms of what is charged.

Mr. Stowers said the report will be finalized in September/early October and a public hearing will be held and following that staff will present their fee recommendations.

Ms. Young thanked staff for all of their work and said the Recreation and Parks Department is now moving in the right direction and should have always been a place where some revenue is generated and are now doing that in a meaningful way that adds value of what is being provided to the residents and she appreciates staff's efforts. Mr. Stowers said the staff is small but are amazing. Ms. Young said she is amazed on what the department has been able to accomplish with such a small staff.

ADJOURNMENT

**** MS. SHANAHAN MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting was adjourned at 7:55PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Dilene Byrd