

Virtual Meeting 6:32 pm

September 16, 2024

Commissioners: Mara Huston, Laurie Eliason, Ben Carmel, Chair, Bobby Beagan, Granger Atkeson

Dennis Mannone - Dir Park and Recreation. Guests - Andy Sheehan, Town Manager

Roll Call: Granger – here, Bobby – here, Mara – here, Laurie - here, Granger - here, Ben - here.

Ben stated the purpose of the meeting is to discuss Park and Recreation topics with the Town Manager, Andy Sheehan. Granger and Ben created a list of topics for discussion and sent them to the Town Manager ahead of the meeting tonight. Areas for discussion included value of Park and Recreation to Sudbury, perspectives on funding Park and Recreation, and long-term plans for the new Fairbank Community Center. Ben added the Commission wanted to get a better understanding of who is responsible for certain areas, such as field bathrooms, areas outside the Community Center and the best way to navigate Recreation projects. The Commission was also looking for information and status on the Open Space and Recreation Plan.

Ben asked the Town Manager how he views Park and Recreation and the Commission's role in the Town. Andy Sheehan, Town Manager, said Park and Recreation is an established department in Town and has been in operation for many years. It provides good amenities to the community, but the funding for the department is a little cloudy, which he will discuss later in the meeting. Recreation departments vary dramatically from community to community. Mara stated she sees the value of Recreation as providing high quality, affordable recreation opportunities for multiple age groups and an incredibly important component to physical and mental health. She said it was evident how important Recreation is to people during the recent Covid lockdown.

The Commissioners and Town Manager continued in a lengthy discussion about the value of Recreation to the Sudbury Community. Discussing topics including, playgrounds, fields, youth sports, rail trails, recreation programs, the Atkinson pool and the new Community Center as part of the reason people chose to move to Sudbury.

Ben asked the Town Manager his perspective on both the short and long-term funding model for the Recreation department amidst the current financial picture for the Town. Andy said it would be nice to offer residents everything for free, whether they use them or not, but that is not the financial model for the Town of Sudbury. He said the funding for the Recreation Department includes two Enterprise Funds, one Revolving Fund and some Town funding. He said Enterprise Funds and Revolving funds are used for fee-only based services.

Mara agreed it made sense for the Atkinson Pool to be in an Enterprise fund. She said the Commission had more questions on the Field Enterprise Fund, since it is funded by the field permit fees, but expenses are paid out to cover bathrooms, playgrounds, courts and other expenses. She would like more detail on what is covered by the Field Enterprise Fund and discuss if the Town should pay for more of those expenses since they are not used solely by the user groups in Town. In addition, the Field Enterprise funds half of the Park and Grounds salaries and benefits. The Revolving Fund covers some salaries and the majority of the department expenses. She said in the last two years, the Town has funded a small amount of the Recreation operating expense. Mara stated her past Recreation funding

presentation showed that the average Sudbury taxpayer pays \$28 dollars a year towards Recreation. She questioned if residents would be willing to have that amount increased by \$7 dollars to \$35 dollars a year. Andy stated that residents can vote at any time to increase their tax levy to pay for services.

Andy agreed that the maintenance costs regarding the bathrooms were a valid question and needs some clarification moving forward. He said currently the Enterprise Funds are in good shape. The Pool Enterprise Fund has retained earnings of over a half million dollars. He said the Recreation fund is good and Field Enterprise Fund has over \$100,000 in retained earnings. He added the Town's General Fund covers approximately 3 of the Recreation salaries.

Andy stated in order to transfer funding from an Enterprise Fund to the General Fund there has to be a capacity within the levy to do that, but right now that is not something he can entertain.

Ben questioned other options for raising funds for Park and Recreation, such as raising permit fee, offering memberships for the Community Center to cover staffing, possibly privatizing field maintenance and not using the Park and Grounds staff. Andy said it's always good to think of other options and other ways to do things rather than do things a certain way because they have always been done that way. He thought any and all options were worth considering.

The Commissioners pointed out the retained earnings were set aside for emergency situations, not everyday expenses. Andy pointed out that the Town can not use the retained earnings for other Town expenses. He said the pool is currently relying on retained earnings for a portion of its funding, roughly 20%, but this is not ideal, because it is a structural deficit. Fortunately, the pool expenses are not exceeding the revenue the pool generates each year. He added the pool has also had to adjust and deal with various shutdowns due to the construction of the new Community Center.

Andy said the Town would not have the ability in the near-term to add more of the Park and Recreation salaries or expenses to the General Fund. He added he wasn't sure if he could say the current financial model would stay status quo moving forward. He did say the Town may have to transition some Recreation salary out of the General Fund into the Enterprise Funds. He hoped this would be a gradual process rather than moving everything in one fiscal year. He said notice of any financial changes would be given in plenty of time to adjust any necessary increase in fees.

Mara was disappointed in this plan for Recreation. She questioned how the Town could suggest cutting Recreation's budget when the schools were able to find \$250,000 for a HVAC project. She also commented on the Recreation and Culture budget, drawing attention to the fact the Library budget increased after terminating its relationship with their Friends group. She said the Commission would need to understand the impact that those changes would have on staff and the ability to keep Recreation programs affordable for residents. She thought it made sense to keep the Pool in an Enterprise Fund. Her bigger concern was the Recreation Revolving fund. The Field Enterprise Fund would need to be reviewed to determine how expenses should be separated by field permit users and the Town.

Andy agreed and said he wasn't making the decision in a vacuum, but looked forward to additional conversations on the topic so he can better understand the implications of decisions that may come down the road later.

Ben asked if an override in Town would impact the decisions on Recreation. Andy said it could, but he didn't want to speculate. He said it is always up to the residents to choose to increase their taxes in order to pay for services.

Bobby stated he was hopeful Recreation would be able to lower fees for the residents of Sudbury. He hoped that people would see Park and Recreation as an essential part of the community and one of the reasons to move to Town.

Andy reiterated that tonight was not the end of the conversation. He said the Town's finances will take an extended period of time to stabilize and funding sources for Recreation, the Pool and Field Enterprise Funds and Recreation Revolving Fund, are part of the discussion. He wanted to present accurate information to the Commission. He noted several people had mentioned fees and asked if a comparative fee study had been done recently to see were Sudbury stands related to similar Towns.

Laurie said she worked with Dennis a few years ago on field permit fees and they set up a new fee model. She recalled that Town's don't always operate the same and she said Sudbury was on the high side of what was being charged for field permits.

Ben stated he thought the Commission was overdue for a field user group meeting in light of potential fee increases and a review of fees in general.

Mara expressed hope that the discussion would encourage Andy and the Town to review other options before making major changes to the current funding of Recreation. Andy responded that no decision had been made at this time in regard to what is covered under the general fund and it would not occur in the next fiscal year's budget. He said changes would be down the road which allows time to review all options in cooperation with the Commission and Park and Recreation staff. He said the Recreation Funds have been in operation for a quite a long time and have operated well and allowed the Town to provide programs to residents.

Ben stated one of the Commission's priorities was to figure out the Community Center usage. He asked how the Commission could help move forward discussion on that issue. It was agreed that this was a larger discussion, but Andy stated a usage meeting would include himself, the primary users of the center, and the Combined Facilities Director. Discussion would include technology and how the center would be scheduled and how the space is made available to outside groups or secondary users. This discussion will start in the next few months and be completed by the end of the year. He added most of the work in the center is complete, but there is still drainage work and some acoustical work to complete.

Andy offered to return to a Commission meeting and to keep the dialogue open. He will be starting budget planning for the next fiscal year in a few weeks, so within the next few months the Town will have a good idea what next year will look like financially along with the next couple of years. He appreciated the Commissions feedback and the opportunity to speak at the meeting.

Laurie asked about after school care and transportation to the new Community Center. She stated if the Town was moving towards a more self-funded model for Recreation she thought the Town needed to support and help the programs be successful, possible assisting with transportation. Laurie added the importance of completing the Open Space and Recreation Plan.

Andy stated he has had discussion with the Planning Director and they are evaluating proposals for the Field Use Study which has to happen before the Open Space and Recreation Plan. He thought the field study would be complete in 6 to 8 months and then they would move on to the Open Space and Recreation Plan.

Mara asked about an after-school care working group, which has been brought up as a discussion point before in meetings. Andy said there is no working group set up at this time. He has had discussion with Dennis about Park and Recreation's after school programs with transportation provided by the new Recreation bus. This will help with the after-school issue even though it is a limited number of kids. This topic will continue to be discussed as the year goes on.

Ben summarized the meeting as having insightful comments on how to focus future discussions. He stated over the next Commission meetings the Commission will continue discussions on policies, engage with user groups in regard to field needs, and drive towards additional programming at the new Community Center.

Andy thanked the Commissioners and said he looked forward to future discussions as the Town gets into deeper budget development and he sees how the finances look in the Enterprise Funds and the Revolving Fund along with the General Fund.

Mara asked to hear if Dennis had any comment on the discussion points. Dennis did not have any comment.

Mara mentioned she noticed there were several minutes not posted yet on the website. She thought one might be from the walk at Haskell which haven't been approved yet

Mara made a motion to adjourn. Grainger seconded the motion. Vote: Laurie – yes, Bobby – yes, Mara – yes, Grainger – yes, Ben – yes. Motion passed in favor 5-0.