



Date: February 16, 2011

To: Thomas H. Bonfield, City Manager
Through: Theodore L. Voorhees, Deputy City Manager
From: Rhonda B. Parker, Director, Parks and Recreation
Subject: Examining Underutilized City Parks

Executive Summary

In 2010, Durham Parks and Recreation (DPR) undertook the goals of reducing parks operations costs while still improving customer services. One method we looked at was the possibility of re-purposing underutilized City parks, potentially reducing routine landscaping maintenance in some sites while at the same time responding to how a community is or is not using a particular park.

Recommendation

DPR is proposing a mix of actions to respond to conditions in the 14 parks we ultimately studied in detail, from identifying other potential site management partners to removing some underused equipment from several sites.

Background

In 2010, Durham Parks and Recreation (DPR) undertook the goals of reducing parks operations costs while still improving customer services. One method we looked at was the possibility of re-purposing underutilized City parks, potentially reducing routine landscaping maintenance while at the same time responding to how a community is or is not using a particular park.

Staff determined which parks to examine in detail by two criteria: (1) parks for which DPR has very low or no user registration numbers for courts, fields, or shelters and (2) from that initial list, parks in which staff observed no use during initial site scoping visits. Those criteria led us to examine 14 parks: Unity Village, Shady Oaks, Grant St., Rockwood, White Oak, Carroll St., Sandy Creek, Oakwood, Drew-Granby, Rocky Creek, Birchwood, Belmont, Lakeview, and Red Maple.

For each of those parks, staff collected park user counts (using the nationally-recognized SOPARC methodology: System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities), current operations costs, vehicle counts (when applicable), history of citizen involvement, police reports, deed information, and proximity of other City park facilities.

Issues/Analysis

While each of these parks was selected by the same criteria, different situations played out for each site. Some have deed encumbrances (and some more than one encumbrance) which

would make a significant change in use impractical. Some, while having low user numbers now, have recently been adopted by a citizens group. Some would seem to be open to a change in use to better serve the community, possibly for urban agriculture. These parks are located across the City, but what they have in common seems to be an unfortunate location for one reason or another: either they are too hard to find or access, or they have no significant residential area to serve, or the demographics simply have changed around them and a neighborhood that one had small children now has empty nesters who no longer use a playground site. Each one of the sites is examined in detail in the full report.

Alternatives

The changes in use suggested by this study are not major; and the savings will be real but not huge. The Council could choose to make no changes in the current uses of any park until a full City-wide master plan study is done at some future date. The current park master plan dates from 2003, and a new plan is needed.

Financial Impact

The estimate for funding needed to make the proposed changes is a one-time cost of \$19,000. Those changes should generate about \$18,150 per year in maintenance savings.

SDBE Summary

There are not SDBE issues involved in this study.