

NORTH LITTLE ROCK PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION MINUTES

March 18, 2025

The North Little Rock Parks and Recreation commission meeting was called to order by Mrs. Vicki Stephens at 5:00 p.m. on March 18, 2025 at the North Little Rock Community Center.

Commission Members Present: Toby Burkett, Laura Juels, Don Skrivanos, Otistene Smith and Vicki Stephens.

Vote for Excused or Unexcused Absences: Randall Bradley notified that he was unable to attend the commission meeting due to work. Neil Bryant did not attend. Mr. Skrivanos, made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Juels, to excuse Mr. Bradley and Mr. Bryant. All voted aye and the motion passed unanimously.

Staff Members Present: Kenny Stephens, Jessie Morgan, Jason Rhodes, Joe Ralston, Jamie Pettit, Casey Canady, Greg Zonner, Jeff Caplinger, Ember Strange, Jeff Scott and Daniel Cornelison.

Others Present: Officer James Neeley and Meg Gholson.

Disposition of Minutes: Mrs. Stephens presented the following minutes to be approved:

- Regular Meeting – September 16, 2024
- Regular Meeting – November 18, 2024
- Budget Meeting – November 26, 2024
- Regular Meeting – December 16, 2024
- Regular Meeting – February 25, 2025

Mr. Skrivanos made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Smith to approve all of the presented minutes. All voted aye and the motion passed unanimously.

Proposed Change of Park Hours: Jason Rhodes presented the proposed change of park hours. In an effort to make park hours more uniform, staff have proposed new opening and closing times for all parks. All parks will be closing thirty minutes after sunset. This will help the Park Rangers when locking gates. The Old Mill and Rose City Parks will open at 8:00 a.m. to be more uniform with the other opening times.

Mrs. Juels asked Mr. Rhodes why Stone Links states “not a park at the time”. Mr. Rhodes reported that the last time the park hours were approved by the Parks and Recreation Commission the Parks and Recreation Department did not have that land as a City Park.

Mrs. Stephens asked staff to bring the park hours back to the commission to review the Burns Park – overall hours as it has a 12:00 a.m. closing time.

Park Ranger Jeff Scott informed the commission that having designated closing times at City Parks would help when staff are closing the park gates.

Toby Burkett inquired whether the Park Rangers are only having trouble when closing the parks, or if they have any issues in the mornings. Mr. Scott reported that staff only have issues in the evenings when locking the gates.

Financial Overview: Chief Financial Officer, Ember Strange was present at the March commission meeting to give the commission members a general overview of the operations budget for the Parks and Recreation Department. Ms. Strange reported that the Finance Department staff are working towards closing the 2024 budget. As a government, the City of North Little Rock accrues revenues up to 60 days after the year-end. The Parks and Recreation budget also accrues food and lodging taxes up to 60 days after the year-end. It is usual for the Finance Department to be wrapping up year-end revenues during this time, in preparation for the audit in April. Ms. Strange informed the commission that the following figures are unaudited and would be subject to change as the budget is finalized.

Overall the Parks and Recreation Department's budget ended 2024 very well. Revenues came to \$10,500,000 and expenses were \$10,000,000 with a net income of \$500,000. This includes a transfer from the general fund \$715,000 and \$300,000 from the capital improvement fund. Ms. Strange reported that all funding from the half-penny sales tax fund are all tracked in separate general ledger accounts. The half-penny sales tax fund allocated the Parks and Recreation Department \$1,615,000 towards Funland and \$1,500,000 towards renovating the North Little Rock Community Center in 2023. \$500,000 was allocated from the half-penny sales tax in 2024 towards other community center renovations. A budget amendment was approved by City Council in 2024 allocating an additional \$603,336 towards completing the Funland project. Ms. Strange explained in 2024 there was additional budget amendment of \$750,000 that has not been spent and will be allocated towards other projects for Parks and Recreation. In 2025 there is \$500,000 allocated towards community center renovations funded by the half-penny sales tax.

Toby Burkett inquired about the leftover funding for 2025. Ms. Strange informed the commission that Director Kenny Stephens has begun spending from that fund for current renovations. Ms. Strange reported that she would get an updated dollar figure for the amount that Director Kenny Stephens has spent this year. Mr. Burkett asked if the leftover funding could be used to purchase new equipment. Ms. Strange reported that the excess funding in the General Fund does not have limitations on where it can be spent. It is suggested that is where new equipment should be purchased.

Mrs. Smith inquired about the bid for tennis courts to be repaired at Burns Park Tennis Center. Ms. Strange informed the commission that the bids were not consistent among the contractors. Staff have made more specifications on the resurfacing of the tennis courts. Director Kenny Stephens is looking for a qualified vendor when the bid reopens again.

Toby Burkett asked if the commission will be able to track the general ledger accounts for the projects the department would like to move forward with. Ms. Strange will provide a list of accounts for the commission to track the spending.

Director Kenny Stephens informed the commission of projects that he would like to proceed with. The train track at Funland has been repaired. Staff would like to build three (3) yurts on tournament drive. There are plans for a shade structure to cover the archery range. Floors are to be finished at the North Heights Community Center. Shade structures are needed for the softball field. Funland also is in need of eight (8) shade structures.

Financial Overview (continued): Hydro seed is needed for the grass area in Funland from the train track to the concession stand. Fencing has been installed surrounding Funland. Staff varnished wooden parts of the train at Funland.

Director Kenny Stephens informed the commission that a concession stand is needed at Funland. The department will need to budget \$100,000 for the matching grant towards the concession stand for Funland. Staff looked into options for a restroom and concession stand for Funland and found the most affordable option. Toby Burkett inquired about where the funding would be coming from for the projects Director Kenny Stephens listed. Ember Strange reported the projects should be funded from the leftover \$750,000, with the exception of the stripe machine for soccer. Ms. Strange stated those funds are less restricted for the department to make purchases.

Director Kenny Stephens asked the commission to consider the future of the junior tennis courts at the Burns Park Tennis Center. Director Kenny Stephens asked the commission to consider resurfacing the junior and turning them into pickleball courts. The courts could also remain as junior tennis courts.

Mrs. Smith inquired if there has been any research as to which option would bring in more revenue; leaving them as junior tennis courts or turning them into pickleball courts. Mrs. Juels explained that the junior tennis at the Burns Park Tennis Center should remain tennis courts. Tennis Director Daniel Cornelison informed the commission that if increasing revenues is the goal; the department should consider an indoor pickleball facility for reservations. The facility would be monitored and reserved by the tennis center staff. Mr. Cornelison stated that an indoor pickleball facility would reduce the noise produced from pickleball. The pickleball complex stays busy from 6:00p.m. until 9:00 p.m. due to open play and the leagues playing.

Mrs. Smith inquired about acquiring sponsorship to secure funding to build an indoor pickleball facility. Ms. Strange stated that the Finance Department would be able to setup accounts to track the funding if the department chose to seek sponsors. Mrs. Stephens asked staff how much an indoor facility would cost, this would affect the commission's decision.

Mr. Burkett inquired about the cost to turn the junior tennis courts into pickleball courts versus the cost to resurface them as tennis courts. Mr. Burkett stated that leaving the junior tennis courts as "red ball" courts does not seem to be a good idea as the courts are not currently being used as junior tennis courts. The commission would like to see the cost of both options for the junior tennis courts and which of the options would generate the revenue quickest.

Daniel Cornelison informed the commission that the junior tennis courts would be equivalent to twelve pickleball courts versus three (3) tennis courts. Renting twelve pickleball courts would generate more funding than three (3) tennis courts. Mr. Burkett stated having a cost analysis of the projects would be needed before making a decision on the future of the junior tennis courts.

Mrs. Stephens recalled the projected revenues for Burns Park Tennis Center. The budget states court fees should generate \$160,000, last year's revenues generated \$110,000 in court fees.

Financial Overview (continued): Mr. Skrivanos made a motion, seconded by Mr. Burkett, to approve funding for the projects Director Kenny Stephens listed. All voted aye and the motion passed unanimously.

Approval of TAP (Transportation Alternatives Program) Grant for Recycled Bikes for Kids: Jeff Caplinger presented the Transportation Alternatives Program Grant from the Arkansas Department of Transportation. Mr. Caplinger informed the commission that Meg Gholson from Recycled Bikes for Kids was present to answer any questions. Mr. Caplinger is requesting to apply for the next upcoming cycle. The grant is an 80/20 matching grant; the Parks and Recreation Department would be responsible for paying the 20% which would be around \$8,000.

Ms. Gholson informed the commission that this grant program has provided over 300 bikes to children in the community. Recycled Bikes for Kids have been able to provide bikes for children as well as helmets, locks and general bike instructions. Mr. Caplinger informed the commission that if approved, a resolution would be submitted to the North Little Rock City Council agenda.

Mrs. Juels made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Smith, to approve the next grant cycle and funding for the TAP Grant for Recycled Bikes for Kids. All voted aye and the motion passed unanimously.

Fee Reduction Request: Casey Canady presented a fee reduction request from the Arkansas Wolves. The Arkansas Wolves are requesting permission to hold training sessions twice a week (Tuesday and Thursday) on lit fields, in addition to their scheduled games at the soccer complex. The current policy was put in place to protect the condition of the seven (7) lit soccer fields. Six (6) of the lit fields are on a rotation and used for adult 7v7 games. Field one (1) is the only lit field designated for 11v11 games. This is the stadium field they are requesting for training session and games. These fields are used year-round and staff are obligated to our associated groups to provide the safest playing surface possible. By not allowing practices on lit fields, it allows the fields to remain in game-ready condition.

City Attorney Amy Fields inquired Mr. Casey about the Sports Complex policy that was passed at a previous commission meeting. Mr. Canady informed the commission that the approved Sports Complexes does not allow the department to rent lit fields as practices.

Mrs. Stephens informed the commission that she is not in favor of the fee reduction request. Mrs. Smith stated that the Parks and Recreation Department's fees are set at a reasonable price. Mr. Burkett made a motion, seconded by Mr. Skrivanos, to deny the fee reduction request. All voted aye and the motion passed unanimously.

Director Reports: Director Kenny Stephens informed the commission that Executive Secretary, Jessie Morgan has received a promotion and will be moving to the Mayor's Office in May. Jenni Fields will be filling the position as Executive Secretary at the Parks Administration Office.

Jamie Pettit reported for field reservation and special events. Adult softball and baseball leagues have started. Mrs. Pettit reported having two (2) youth baseball tournaments and one (1) softball tournament. Staff reported that they did not receive any complaints about lighting at the softball complex during the tournament.

Director Reports (continued): Daniel Cornelison reported for Burns Park Tennis Center. Pickleball leagues are continuing; beginners play on Tuesdays, intermediate plays on Wednesdays, and advanced are playing on Thursdays. Tennis leagues are playing outdoors.

Mrs. Stephens reported on the financial aspect of tennis revenues. The commission would like the financial statement to reflect the actual amount of revenues that the Parks and Recreation Department keeps. The financial statement currently shows the total amount that reflects the percentage that the tennis professionals keep. Ms. Strange is aware of the commission's request and will work with staff on reconciling the report to reflect more accurately. Mrs. Stephens reported that the budget reflects that tennis revenues are bringing in roughly \$30,000, however the Parks and Recreation Department is only keeping 15% of that total.

Mr. Cornelison informed Mrs. Smith that staff are continuing to schedule special events at the pickleball complex. The latest special event at the pickleball complex was hosted by a church group.

Mrs. Stephens inquired about the tennis budget reflecting tournament revenues to generate \$30,000. Mr. Cornelison informed the commission that it would be possible to generate that from tournaments, but would be able to get more tournaments if the courts were in better position. Tournament directors prefer to host tournaments on permanent courts; not taped courts.

Greg Zonner reported for Arkansas Inland Maritime Museum. School groups and spring break have kept staff busy.

Joe Ralston reported on Burns Park Golf Course, total revenues were down \$7,000 due to the cold in January and February. Staff had 84 participants at the junior golf tournament.

Jeff Caplinger informed the commission that he's been busy at City Hall with Shara Hutchcraft. Mr. Caplinger helped take photos for department staff for the city website.

Director Kenny Stephens reported that the recreation department is preparing for upcoming events at the community centers. The grand opening for the playground at Funland will be held this Friday, March 21, 2025. Staff will have the train at Funland running in the next week. Easter eggs have been ordered for upcoming events.

Mrs. Stephens informed the commission that there is an Arkansas Action Children's Business Fair being held at Glenview Community Center on April 12, 2025. Mr. Caplinger reported on the previous Children's Business Fair that was also held at Glenview Community Center. Mr. Caplinger informed the commission that the children at the business fair do everything themselves.

Mrs. Smith reported that she and Patrick Isbell represented the Parks and Recreation Department and Commission at Glenview Community Center where shade structures and benches were placed. The benches and shade structures were funded by an AARP Grant.

Calendar of Events: Mrs. Stephens stated the agenda deadline for the next meeting is Tuesday, April 1, 2025 at 2:00 p.m. The April commission meeting will be held Monday, April 21, 2025. The April meeting will take place at 5:00 p.m. at the North Little Rock Community Center.

Adjournment: Mrs. Juels made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Smith, to adjourn the meeting at 6:28 p.m. All voted aye and the motion passed unanimously.

Public Comments/Visitors: Mrs. Stephens opened the meeting for public comments. There were none.

APPROVED BY: 
Chair, Vicki Stephens

SUBMITTED BY: 
Secretary, Otistene Smith