

NORTH LITTLE ROCK PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION MINUTES

September 15, 2025

The North Little Rock Parks and Recreation commission meeting was called to order by Mrs. Vicki Stephens at 5:00 p.m. on September 15th, 2025 at the North Little Rock Community Center.

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

Vote for Excused or Unexcused Absences: Randall Bradley, Neil Bryant, and Toby Burkett were not present for the September 15, 2025 commission meeting.

Mr. Skrivanos made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Smith to excuse Randall Bradley, Neil Bryant, and Toby Burkett from the September 15, 2025 meeting. All voted aye and the motion passed unanimously.

Staff Members Present: Kenny Stephens, Amy Fields, Jennifer Fields, Patrick Isbell, Jamie Pettit, Greg Zonner, Tina Worrell, Daniel Cornelison, and Diane Whitbey.

Others Present: Officer James Neeley, Michelle Shellabarger, Scott Shellabarger, Michelle Andrews, Garrett Andrews, David Larson, Sandy Decoursay, Heather Carnes, Lisa Smith, Janel Jones, Koalton Jones, Kaiden Jones, Detric Jones, Kenneth Love, Wylder Love, Tyler Bailey, Extra Bailey, Jessica Bailey, Michael R. Gee, Channing McClellan, Waylon McClellan, Dede Papadakis and Councilman Nathan Hamilton.

Disposition of Minutes: Mrs. Stephens presented the August 18, 2025 minutes to be approved.

Ms. Juels made a motion, seconded by Mr. Skrivanos to approve the August 18, 2025 minutes. All voted aye and the motion passed unanimously.

Bonzai BMX Requirement Update Jamie Pettit, Program Coordinator, gave an update to the commission regarding Bonzai BMX. She stated that the commission had asked Dave Larson, Board Director of Bonzai BMX, to submit a proposal, which was included in the meeting packets.

Mrs. Pettit explained that Mr. Larson outlined the estimated cost to rebuild the BMX track and how he plans to fund the project. She noted that Mr. Larson was present to answer any questions.

Mrs. Stephens requested that the amount of money Bonzai BMX is requesting be included in the minutes. Mrs. Pettit said Mr. Larson quoted \$13,905 for the rebuild, with an additional \$10,000 if the track is to be coated. He also mentioned needing \$2,000 for a 40-foot container and a concrete pad, although no price was listed for the pad. Mr. Larson is seeking assistance from the City, Parks and Recreation, or Advertising and Promotions (A&P).

Mrs. Stephens acknowledged that Mr. Larson included a list of Bonzai BMX board members in his proposal and thanked him for that.

Mrs. Smith asked if any of the board members were current North Little Rock residents. Mr. Larson said he used to live in North Little Rock (NLR) but moved to Sherwood about three years ago. When asked if there are any current NLR residents on the board, Mr. Larson said he wasn't sure and explained that all board

Bonzai BMX Requirement Update Continued: members are volunteers. Mrs. Smith confirmed that board members are not actively recruited. Mr. Larson agreed.

Mrs. Stephens said her main concern is the cost. She had spoken with Director Kenny Stephens, who confirmed there is no Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), insurance, or department funding available for the rebuild. She said that while she understands the facility was damaged by the tornado, the city doesn't have the funds to restore it right now.

Mr. Larson shared that Bonzai BMX covered most of the rebuild costs last year because they didn't receive the dirt they were expecting. He also said they were short-handed and unable to finish the track.

Director Kenny Stephens said the department guarantees five (5) loads of dirt per year. Last year, Bonzai BMX received 15. Mr. Larson said none were delivered by Parks and Recreation. Director Kenny Stephens clarified that the track used to have asphalt, and once it was removed, the dirt wouldn't hold which led to erosion after rainfall. He also noted that \$9,000 was left in the previous budget for BMX equipment, but there are no available funds this year. Director Kenny Stephens stated budget planning will begin in the next 2–3 weeks. Bonzai BMX could be considered for next year.

Mrs. Stephens pointed out that there was an agreement in place with Bonzai BMX prior to the tornado, but there hasn't been one since. Mrs. Pettit believed one might've been done in 2023 during her maternity leave, but confirmed that no agreement was completed for 2024. Because of that, no funds were set aside for the track.

Mrs. Smith asked if Bonzai BMX was included in FEMA or insurance claims. Director Kenny Stephens explained that the area did not receive significant tornado damage, and most of the issues began after the asphalt was removed. He said the rebuild is still possible, but again, there are no funds in this year's budget.

Mrs. Stephens told Mr. Larson that none of the recent work on the track had been brought to the commission. She stated the commission was not aware of any work had been done or that someone had been hired. Mr. Larson clarified that the person involved is one of three certified BMX track builders, not a consultant.

Mrs. Stephens said this was the first time the commission had heard anything about the work, and it raised concerns about the lack of an official agreement. She reiterated that funding cannot be approved right now, but the proposal could be revisited during the next budget cycle.

She asked Mr. Larson to return with a clear plan that includes how Bonzai BMX intends to raise funds and how many youth riders will use the facility. Mrs. Smith asked if other sources of funding were being considered. Mr. Larson said that when he spoke to Steve Shields and Jason Rhodes, he was told 1,000 loads of dirt could be made available if needed. He also said the asphalt was paid for by Bonzai BMX, not the city, and mentioned that Mayor Terry Hartwick had been involved in those conversations.

Bonzai BMX Requirement Update Continued Mrs. Stephens explained that Steve Shields and Jason Rhodes are no longer with the department. Director Kenny Stephens has held the role for about two years. She said if this had been a priority, it should have been brought directly to the new director. She also said Mayor Hartwick is no longer the director of Parks and Recreation and, as mayor, has not asked the commission to move forward with this.

Mrs. Stephens said the proposal cannot be approved at this time. She informed Mr. Larson she had reviewed past minutes and found no record supporting the claims made in the current proposal. She told Mr. Larson they will need to start the process over.

Director Kenny Stephens asked Patrick Isbell how many loads of dirt were actually delivered. Mr. Isbell said it was close to 30. Director Stephens noted that although only 5 loads are guaranteed per year, they worked to provide as many as possible, but it seemed like it was never enough.

Mrs. Stephens asked the commission for their thoughts. Ms. Juels said she supports the idea of a BMX track but understands that the money just isn't there right now.

Mrs. Stephens reminded everyone that the commission will hold a budget meeting next month. She asked Mr. Larson to meet with Mrs. Pettit before then to provide updates on Bonzai BMX's plans moving forward.

Mrs. Pettit said she could connect Mr. Larson with the A&P department. Mrs. Stephens asked how much revenue a tournament at the BMX track might bring in. Mrs. Pettit said A&P provides grants and sponsorships as long as the event promotes North Little Rock hotels and restaurants.

Mrs. Stephens said once all the information is gathered, they can take another look at the proposal. Director Stephens added that they'll need a solid, final number with no missing details.

Mrs. Stephens encouraged Mr. Larson to work directly with Director Kenny Stephens and Mrs. Pettit. She thanked the Bonzai BMX group for attending.

The North Little Rock Tourism Department Sports Feasibility Study Mrs. Stephens stated that North Little Rock Tourism is presenting the Sports Feasibility Study at the Argenta Contemporary Theater on September 23, 2025 at 9:00am.

Conversion of Red Ball Courts at Burns Park Tennis Center Daniel Cornelison, Tennis Director, presented information regarding the conversion of the red ball courts at the Burns Park Tennis Center. He stated that the estimate through the CO-OP came back higher than expected. Mrs. Stephens noted that the estimate was \$750,000. Mr. Cornelison explained that a 5-inch post-tension concrete overlay would be costly. He added that he is working with another contractor who will also seek a bid through the CO-OP. The contractor is coordinating with Purchasing Manager, Amy Smith to determine requirements. Mr. Cornelison stated that he is working on this with Director Kenny Stephens and will provide the bid once it is received.

Mrs. Smith commented that she thought the CO-OP was intended to provide the best price. Mr. Cornelison responded that the concrete itself would be guaranteed and warranted for 50 years, while the resurfacing material would have a 10-year warranty.

Conversion of Red Ball Courts at Burns Park Tennis Center Continued: Director Kenny Stephens emphasized that the City does not want the same issues that occurred with the other courts to happen again. He noted that the current asphalt has cracks and the courts must

be durable. He added that a target bid closer to \$300,000–\$350,000 would be more workable. He also stated that durability is more important than simply finding a reasonable price.

Mr. Cornelison explained that, if feasible, there would be no permanent nets. This would allow for professional-grade movable pickleball or tennis nets and create a flexible multi-use space. He also noted that he has spoken with A&P about potential funding and options for additional activities such as ping pong or baggo.

Mrs. Stephens noted that Sherwood is preparing to seek a sales tax extension. If approved, the funds would be used to build an indoor facility including volleyball, basketball, and pickleball courts, as well as rentable event space. She asked if Cabot or Conway have indoor facilities. Mr. Cornelison confirmed that Cabot does but was unsure about Conway.

Mrs. Stephens stated that the feasibility study will help determine the best direction for these courts, particularly with nearby communities expanding their offerings. Mr. Cornelison added that if North Little Rock pursued pickleball, the City could provide 22–24 courts, allowing for larger tournaments compared to cities with only 10–12 courts.

St. Joseph Farmstead Burns Park RV Campground Proposal and Overview: Scott Shellabarger, Board Member at St. Joseph of Arkansas, presented information on the possibility of St. Joseph Farmstead relocating to the Burns Park RV Campground. He stated that the Farmstead had lost its lease at the old orphanage and operates an educational farm. He noted that they manage the largest community garden in North Little Rock, with 50 garden beds and 61 residents currently using them. Mr. Shellabarger said they would very much like to move operations to Burns Park and run the program from the old RV Park.

Mrs. Smith asked for clarification on costs, specifically whether minimal costs would mean expenses for the Parks and Recreation Department or if St. Joseph Farmstead would incur all costs. She asked if Director Kenny Stephens and his group would be responsible for building or construction work. Mr. Shellabarger responded that St. Joseph would incur all costs and only needed the City to provide the space.

Mrs. Stephens clarified, asking if St. Joseph Farmstead was not requesting infrastructure work from the City, as she thought she had read otherwise. Mr. Shellabarger replied that while they would not expect it, the City has previously assisted St. Joseph Farmstead as a nonprofit. He stated in the past the City of North Little Rock has provided dirt. He clarified that such help would be appreciated but not counted on.

Director Kenny Stephens informed Mr. Shellabarger that the RV Park had experienced theft of copper wire from the water lines. He explained that restoring utilities would involve significant costs, such as a new meter loop and breaker box. He estimated that running water alone could cost \$3,500–\$4,000.

St. Joseph Farmstead Burns Park RV Campground Proposal and Overview Continued: Director Kenny Stephens emphasized the need for clarity regarding these expenses. Mr. Shellabarger stated St. Joseph Farmstead understood costs were part of any location they pursued.

Mrs. Smith asked about potential revenue to the City, referencing a figure mentioned in the proposal. Mr. Shellabarger clarified that the proposal was only a draft put forward by the Mayor and not set in stone. He stated that any final agreement would require Parks Commission, City Council, and legal approval.

City Attorney, Amy Fields introduced herself to Mr. Shellabarger. She stated that Chief of Staff, Mike Davis had spoken with her recently regarding the proposal, but she had not seen the materials included in the Commission packet until shortly before the meeting. Ms. Fields explained that Burns Park is restricted by ordinance to recreational and park purposes only, and City property cannot be leased to corporations or nonprofits without adequate consideration. She noted that while the concept looks promising, several legal and procedural steps must be addressed, including state law restrictions and approval from the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage, and Tourism.

Mrs. Stephens stated that the Commission would not be able to move forward until legal confirmed whether the project could proceed. Mr. Shellabarger asked about next steps. Ms. Fields responded that the City would need to review ordinances and state law to determine if and how an agreement could be structured. She emphasized her concern about lease restrictions but noted that processes were available if pursued properly.

Mrs. Stephens advised that Mr. Shellabarger and City Attorney, Amy Fields should work together to determine whether a legal path exists for the proposal. Mr. Shellabarger agreed, stating that St. Joseph Farmstead wanted to be fully transparent. Ms. Fields said she would begin reviewing the matter and work toward a solution.

Sandy Decoursay, Director of St. Joseph Farmstead, added that the organization has been a part of the North Little Rock community for a long time and hopes to remain there. She stated that St. Joseph Farmstead would be publicly accessible, similar to other park features, and that they have the capacity to manage the project.

Mrs. Stephens concluded by stating that City Attorney, Amy Fields would review the matter further and bring back a recommendation to the Commission.

Director Reports: Director Kenny Stephens reported on Burns Park Golf Course, stating that \$151,000 was acquired last month. He noted that the course would like to purchase 25 additional electric golf carts due to ongoing issues with the gas carts. He reported that 19 carts were down last week, with 5 still awaiting parts that cannot be obtained because of tariffs. Director Stephens explained that electric carts would be more efficient moving forward.

Mrs. Smith asked if golf carts had recently been purchased. Director Stephens confirmed that 25 gas carts had been purchased previously but said they now want to transition to electric carts. He stated that the trade-in value would be about \$2,500 per cart, with the cost for 25 electric carts estimated at \$141,000.

Director Reports Continued: Patrick Isbell, Parks Superintendent, reported for Parks Maintenance. He stated that all electrical work at Sherman Park Community Center had been completed. At the RV Park, cleanup began last Friday with maintenance staff and prisoners working on brush removal, bush hogging, weed eating, and other tasks. The restroom was also pressure washed. While the electrical is not yet in place, everything else looks good. Mr. Isbell further reported that the Soccer Complex has many lights out, and staff will begin looking at replacements as soccer games are about to start.

Jamie Pettit, Program Coordinator, reported for Special Events. She stated that at the last commission meeting she had talked about a music festival planned for Riverfront Park over Labor Day weekend. She informed the commission that the event did not happen because it was canceled. The cancellation was due to the organizer not submitting all required documentation. She said the organizer has asked to return next year, but staff are not sure if that will move forward. Mrs. Pettit stated that the department received many phone calls about refunds not being issued. Mrs. Smith added that the organizer went on television claiming he would be back. Mrs. Pettit confirmed that he continued promoting the festival for two days after he had been told it was canceled.

Mrs. Pettit also reported that the Baseball Players Association (BPA) fall league has not taken place for the past three years. She said only 80 children participated this past spring, compared to more than 300 in Lakewood. She explained that BPA has had board turnover and that their numbers continue to decline. She stated that she plans to meet with Patrick Isbell and Darren Austin at the end of the year. They will review contracts and set up a meeting with BPA to discuss their plans. Mrs. Stephens asked if the low numbers were due to field or lighting conditions. Mrs. Pettit responded that it seems more related to location and league programming. She said Lakewood leagues have received better feedback. She said BPA has struggled with communication and has canceled games abruptly. She added that Burns Park fields are still being rented out to other teams. Mrs. Stephens stated that if the league is not being properly managed, she does not see a reason to extend the agreement. Mrs. Pettit said she would like to meet with BPA and bring a proposal back to the commission in January.

Mrs. Pettit said many children are no longer playing recreational ball. Instead, they are playing travel ball. She reported that she continues to receive complaints about the softball field lights. She said Casey has heard players say they do not want to play at Burns Park because the lights are unstable. Mrs. Pettit said she received a quote of \$300,000 to \$325,000 to repair two fields. Director Kenny Stephens stated that he had spoken with the Mayor about the situation. He told the Mayor that lights are needed in order for the fields to function. He suggested beginning with Field 2. Mrs. Stephens requested that the project be included in the budget. Director Stephens confirmed that it will be added under capital.

Mrs. Pettit concluded with announcements of upcoming events. She stated that the Big Dam Bridge 100 will take place on September 27. She said about 3,000 riders are expected to start and finish at Riverfront Park. She reported that the Capital City Classic is scheduled for the last weekend of September and the first weekend of October. She also announced that the Arkansas Open Disc Golf Tournament will be held at Stone Links on October 11 and 12.

Director Reports Continued: Tina Worrell, Recreation Superintendent, reported for Recreation. She stated that the after-school program is underway. She said the Tiny Tots basketball and Tiny Tots cheerleading programs have started. She noted that preparations are being made for Halloween. Events will be held at four community centers. Staff are still deciding what to do for Halloween at Funland.

Mrs. Worrell stated that pools have been closed. Staff are waiting for cooler weather before covering them. She said the splash pad will remain open until the end of the month due to the warm weather. Current hours are Thursdays and Fridays from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. The splash pad is also open on Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. She added that adult programs are also running, including pickleball and other classes. She stated that it has been a busy season.

Mrs. Smith asked about the train. Mrs. Stephens responded that the train needs to retire. Director Kenny Stephens stated that more than \$100,000 has been spent on the train. He explained that there is a plan to repair the train and the passenger cart this winter. He said the hope is to pull the train off the tracks and into the shop during the winter. He noted that the train is a 1971 model and that usage has already been reduced.

Mrs. Smith asked about enrollment in the after-school program at Sherman Park, noting there were only seven students. Mrs. Worrell explained that staff promoted the program to the school across the street, but that school already offers several programs. She said they also reached out to surrounding neighborhoods but received little response. Mrs. Smith asked for clarification that the issue was lack of interest and not lack of funding. Mrs. Worrell confirmed that it was due to lack of interest in that area.

Director Kenny Stephens reported that the North Little Rock Community Center will need a new roof. He stated that the cost will be around \$400,000. He said he is proud of what has been accomplished with the half-cent sales tax. Director Kenny Stephens added that North Heights is scheduled to be painted as part of that work. He stated that progress has been made at every center. Mrs. Smith asked if North Heights would be painted white. Director Stephens replied yes.

Greg Zonner, Museum Director, reported for the Arkansas Inland Maritime Museum. He stated that the Arkansas Symphony event went very well. He noted that the event received a full-page spread in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. He said AIMM would like to host more events and make them more open to the public while charging admission. Mr. Zonner reported that AIMM is fully booked for overnight stays until Christmas. He said they are receiving many inquiries from other boats. He stated that the submariner magazine for this quarter included a full-page spread about overnights at AIMM.

He informed the commission that the leak at the facility is "sort of" fixed. He explained that water used to run to one pocket, but now it spreads to six different pockets. He said they may need to consult the repair team again.

Mr. Zonner stated that AIMM has remained busy even with school back in session. He noted that a wedding with 50 guests was held the previous night. He said it was the first large wedding hosted at the museum, with full decorations, unlike the smaller weddings held there in the past.

Daniel Cornelison, Tennis Director, reported for Burns Park Tennis Center. He stated that high school tennis has started during the week. Mr. Cornelison informed the commission the Tennis Center had hosted a couple of tournaments in August. He noted that in October the next-to-last courts from the original nine will be resurfaced. He added they are still working on the junior courts. Mr. Cornelison reported that the center has been busy.

Director Reports Continued: Director Kenny Stephens reported that a budget meeting is planned next month to review the numbers and capital projects. He noted that Steve Ralston's contract will be up for renewal in November. Mrs. Stephens added that City Attorney Amy Fields will review Tennis Pro Thomas Anderson's contract. She noted that although he negotiated for a year and a half, they will double-check the details.

Calendar of Events: Mrs. Stephens stated the agenda deadline for the next meeting is Tuesday, October 7, 2025 at 2:00 p.m. The September commission meeting will be held Monday, October 20, 2025. The meeting will take place at 5:00 p.m. at the North Little Rock Community Center.

Adjournment: Mrs. Smith made a motion, seconded by Ms. Juels, to adjourn the meeting at 5:54 p.m. All voted aye and the motion passed unanimously.

Public Comments/Visitors: Mrs. Stephens opened the meeting for public comments. Lisa Smith introduced herself and stated she is a frequent visitor to the Burns Park Dog Park. She referred to the handout provided to the commissioners outlining wants and needs for the dog park. Lisa Smith noted that many people bring their dogs there, and it is common to have 10–12 dogs present in the evenings.

Mrs. Stephens asked Lisa Smith to list specific improvements. Lisa Smith stated that the main concern is lighting. There are only lights at the front of the park and none in the back, which creates safety concerns. She suggested adding more lights and possibly a walking track, similar to the one at Murray Park Dog Park. Lisa Smith thanked the City for providing water and dog waste bags. She also mentioned that someone had suggested a dog wash station, though she believed that might be more of a private business. Director Kenny Stephens clarified that some dog washes operate like vending machines. Lisa Smith noted that it could generate revenue.

Councilman Nathan Hamilton spoke in support of the dog park. He said he values parks and recreation facilities and enjoys visiting them. He mentioned the possibility of working with the Little Rock Zoo on a train partnership and shared that he has many ideas related to the A&P's Sports Feasibility Study. He noted that Little Rock had proposed an indoor facility during its recent sales tax initiative, which did not pass. He stated that a city of North Little Rock's size should have an indoor facility of that caliber, and he sees a void to be filled. He added that the commission already does an excellent job making decisions for the community.

Councilman Hamilton also said Lisa Smith is a friend from the dog park and that he supports her and others who use the facility. He noted the dog park is a gathering place that draws visitors, including people from outside Arkansas who travel with their dogs and spend money in the city.

Public Comments/Visitors Continued: Mrs. Stephens suggested adding benches with backs. Director Kenny Stephens stated that the two main requests were benches and lighting, which would not be very costly, and the department could begin looking into that.

Dede Papadakis then introduced herself as a member of the Burns Park Dog Park group. She explained that the group communicates through GroupMe and has built a sense of community. She stated that many residents live in apartments without yards, making dog parks essential for exercise and socialization. She noted that visitors often compare Burns Park with other dog parks such as Murray and MacArthur.

Dede Papadakis shared that Murray Park saw an increase in visitors after a walking track was added, which had been funded partly by a benefactor. She explained that the track provided a strong draw and suggested similar improvements could boost use of the Burns Park facility. She emphasized that dog owners are highly committed to their pets, who are considered family members, and that investment in benches, lighting, or other amenities would be a positive addition for the City of North Little Rock.

Mrs. Stephens thanked the group for attending and told Lisa Smith she could reach out to Director Kenny Stephens at any time for assistance.

APPROVED BY:


Chair, Vicki Stephens

SUBMITTED BY:


Secretary, Otistene Smith