

MEMORANDUM

TO: Town Council

FROM: Wesley McMahon, Vice Chair
Parks, Greenways, and Recreation Commission

SUBJECT: Petition to designate all 36.2 acres of the American Legion Property for use as a community park

DATE: March 1, 2020

On February 18, 2020, the Parks, Greenways, and Recreation Commission reviewed the presentation from the February 12, 2020, Council Work Session on the American Legion Property and discussed other information related to the property. The Commission voted unanimously (6-0) to petition the Council to designate all 36.2 acres of the American Legion Property for use as a community park.

It is the role and responsibility of the Parks, Greenways, and Recreation Commission to inform the Council on Parks and Recreation needs and advocate for strong public amenities, now and into the future. The town is making progress on other key priorities such as commercial development and affordable housing. There is commercial growth in Eastowne, Blue Hill, Glen Lennox and Downtown. Since 2011, the Town has increased the number of approved and completed affordable housing units and last year passed an affordable housing bond. During this same time, however, while supporting parks and greenways through the passage of bonds in 2015, the Town has reduced its financial support of Parks and Recreation maintenance and applied \$4.3 million of Parks and Recreation bonds to the purchase of the American Legion property. The Commission has recently petitioned the Council to restore Parks and Recreation's annual funding allocation for small projects to \$370,000 per year and to fully fund necessary tennis repairs at Cedar Falls and Ephesus and now, too, must act to demonstrate its support for developing a community park at the American Legion property.

We believe the allocation of the entire American Legion Property for the sole use of Parks and Recreation is the Town's best chance to ensure sufficient, high-quality leisure amenities in eastern Chapel Hill. We are not aware of any other plans, opportunities, or enough land to achieve this goal of creating a sufficient community park that will be a public resource for everyone in Chapel Hill. The Commission would like to make Council members aware of the following points:

Comprehensive Park Plan (2013)

Since the 1970s the Town has had a goal of providing four community parks to serve different geographical areas of town. We have built Southern Community Park, Homestead Park, and Cedar Falls Park to serve the southern, western, and northern portions of Chapel Hill, respectively. The missing piece of the overall strategy is a larger park to serve the eastern portion of Town. The American Legion property is ideal for serving as the community park location in east Chapel Hill.

The need for a community park on the American Legion property appears in the Council approved 2013 Comprehensive Parks Plan. Pages 4-7 indicate that our current community park system does not meet demand, and explicitly recommends "purchasing or leasing acreage from the property owned by American Legion Post 6" as a way to meet this need.

Supporting the Parks and Recreation Master Plan is a stated goal of the Chapel Hill 2020 plan:

“Support the Parks and Recreation Master Plan and the Greenways Master Plan to provide recreation opportunities and ensure safe pedestrian and bicycle connections (NOC.4)”.

We believe that the entire acreage is needed for park purposes. We welcome Council discussion on how needs and stated goals for Parks and Recreation would be met without allocation of the entire parcel for park purposes.

Rapidly Increasing Density and the Need for Open Space

The adjacent 168 acres of the Blue Hill District is zoned for a very high density, but with very minimal public open and green space. The allocation of the entire Legion property for use as a community park may be the best option to meet the need for residents in this growing high density area. The population and density of the Blue Hill District and adjacent areas has grown since adoption of the 2013 Comprehensive Parks Plan. The draft Future Land Use Map projects an even greater number of residents near the American Legion property.

Sustainability

A full size community park could be an anchor for a true live, work, and play model that is advantageous to achieving the Town’s sustainability goals. If there is insufficient access to recreation in this district, residents will be forced to drive to other Town facilities or places in the region, which would result in increased traffic and carbon emissions.

Access to Park Space and Social Equity

A community park meets many of the recommended evaluation criteria for the property, as defined by the American Legion Task Force. Specifically, we want to make sure that this space recognizes and serves the diversity of citizens in Chapel Hill. Designating this land as a community park can be an excellent way to achieve this goal. There is a need for affordable recreation spaces and programs in Chapel Hill, especially summer camps for youth. It is the role of this Commission to champion accessible and low-cost open space and recreation programs that everyone can enjoy. The American Legion property presents what could be a once in a generation opportunity to make good on this responsibility to provide services for all.

Land Banking and Development Costs

The Town could land bank the property for future park development if funding is not available for park development in the near term. If a portion of the property is sold, it is gone forever.

A master plan for this site has not been completed, and the cost of any future amenities has not been determined. It is safe to envision, however, a total investment in the tens of millions for even a modest sized community park. The amount of money gained from the sale of a portion of the property would likely not be significant enough to allow us to build a community center or other major facility in the near future.

We don’t believe it is worth losing land forever in exchange for a small portion of future funding needs. At the very least the community should exhaust all avenues of funding from grants to partnerships and donors before transferring the land back to private interests at the expense of public benefit.

Parks and Recreation Staff and Advisory Board Participation

The Commission requests that the Council include Parks and Recreation staff and advisory board members as key partners in design efforts going forward. We believe it was a missed opportunity to

not include Parks and Recreation staff and the Commission in the development of the design presented at the February 12, 2020 Council work session. We believe the Council and community could have benefited from this perspective. A few examples include:

- The way the drawing was presented to Council members and the community made it appear that the decision for allocation among a variety of uses has already been made.
- The description of the type of uses for the designated park land is premature. Showing designated uses and specific amenities at this early stage, without having completed a site master plan involving public and Commission input, does not accurately portray the current stage of the project and causes confusion and angst.
- The design had limited indication of multi-modal access and through connectivity. We believe that this is of the utmost importance. Any design plan, from the earliest stages, should include bicycle and pedestrian connectivity.

Thank you for considering this petition from the Chapel Hill Parks, Greenways, and Recreation Commission to allocate 100% of the American Legion property toward the goal of providing a community park that will serve all residents of Chapel Hill.