



Parks & Recreation Committee - Board of Representatives

Jennifer Matheny, Chair

Daniel R. Sandford, Vice Chair

Continued Special Meeting Committee Report

Date: Wednesday, November 13, 2024

Time: 7:00 p.m.

Place: *This meeting was held remotely.*

The Parks & Recreation Committee will meet as indicated above, **jointly with the Land Use-Urban Redevelopment Committee.**

In attendance were Parks and Recreation Committee Chair Jennifer Matheny and Committee member Reps. Virgil de la Cruz, Cara Gilbride and Thomas Kuczynski. Parks and Recreation Committee member Rep. Daniel Sandford, Irene Saftic and Carl Weinberg was absent or excused.

Land Use/Urban Redevelopment Committee Co-Chairs Nina Sherwood and Carmine Tomas, and Committee Member Reps. Bonnie Kim Campbell, Virgil de la Cruz, James Grunberger, Thomas Kuczynski, Jennifer Matheny, Terry Adams, Karen Camporeale, and Annie M. Summerville. Land Use/Urban Redevelopment Committee member Rep. Don Mays was absent or excused.

Also in attendance were Reps. Sean Boeger and Kindrea Walston; City staff Ralph Blessing, Land Use Bureau Chief; Erin McKenna, Senior Planner, Parks and Recreation Commission members Melanie Hollas and Paul Newman, and members of the public.

Parks and Recreation Committee Chair Matheny called the meeting to order at 7:07 p.m.

Item No.	Description	Invitee(s) or Designee(s)
1. PR31.036	REVIEW; Zoning of City Parks 10/08/2024 – Submitted by Rep. Matheny 10/24/2024 – Held by committee 5-0-0 11/13/2024 – Recommended to Steering	RECOMMENDED TO STEERING
<i>Land Use/UR Committee Secondary</i>		

Parks and Recreation Committee Chair Matheny opened the meeting and called on Ms. Hollas to provide an update on how many of the City's parks are not zoned as parks. She explained that there are multiple zoning designations on different parks throughout Stamford and the Parks and Recreation Commission believe it's a good idea and an added level of protection going into the future for the parks to be rezoned as Parks. Ms. Hollas advised that a list of the multiple research questions from the prior Oct. 24th joint meeting of

Parks and Recreation and Land Use/Urban Redevelopment Committees was researched and emailed to the Board of Representatives office and the committee member representatives. This list has been added to the legislative file history.

Mr. Blessing discussed the Land Use Bureau's preliminary research findings on City parkland zoning. It appears the newer parks have not been zoned as parks, but some of the older ones are. When Land Use Bureau conducts any re-zoning of City parklands they try to properly zone them. For those not currently zoned as parks, since they are still City property, there are still protections in effect for these lands that are being used as parks. However, there was no official answer in the records as to why all City parklands are not currently zoned as parks.

Chair Matheny opened a question-and-answer session for both Committees with the invited presenters at 7:16 p.m.

Rep. Kuczynski asked about who owns the Bartlett Arboretum and Stamford Museum & Nature Center. Ms. McKenna clarified the ownership of these 2 facilities (City owns the Arboretum and 2 adjoining parcels to the Nature Center/Museum) and offered to send a map to the Board showing their ownership as a follow-up (Bartlett Arboretum is RA2 zoned). Zoning kicks in when the property is sold or disposed of per Connecticut State Statutes. The conditions to sell parkland are more rigorous than for other lands that belong to the City. Mr. Blessing explained if both were zoned Park it would make it easier for them to continue their current use, as it would eliminate the need for special permits and would create easier planning for new projects at these properties. He gave the example of RA2 zoning allows current uses at these sites per special permits and if they were instead zoned as parks there would probably be less requirements. Also: the Bartlett Arboretum appears to pre-date the zoning information on file as they found no special permits on file.

Mr. Blessing gave a short slide presentation titled "Inconsistencies on the Master Plan & Zoning Maps" which showed a sample of parks on maps with their variety of zoning listed by parcel. Parks listed in the presentation included Veterans Park, Columbus Park (both shown on 2nd map in slides), and Czescik Park (shown on aerial view slide). During the aerial view slide, Mr. Blessing explained how consolidation of parcels in the park shown would clean up the zoning that may have been done incorrectly over the years or decades. He advised he would email the slides to the Board of Representatives office for adding to the legislative file. Mr. Blessing advised that a \$100,000 (\$100K) capital budget expenditure to fully fund the parks rezoning project would be submitted, and if approved, would allow for the hiring of a licensed Connecticut surveyor to be hired to complete the project. Ideally this amount would cover the entire rezoning of all of the City's parks, with a rough estimate of \$10K-\$20K of cost per park to achieve the rezoning. If the funding should fall short, the initial \$100K would show how many parks can be rezoned for that amount and allow the Land Use Bureau a guideline of how much more it would cost to complete the project in future years.

Rep. Kuczynski suggested the Land Use Bureau reach out to Redniss [Redniss and Mead] and see if they'd offer their services to the City on this project on a pro bono basis as some firms have done in the past, whether it be legal services or other services. Ms. Hollas and Mr. Newman agreed to bring this suggestion back to the Parks Commission.

Rep. de la Cruz inquired to the impetus of the recent Mill River Park rezoning [1- What was the motivation to undertake that effort? 2- How much did it cost? 3-How was it funded?] Mr. Blessing gave a brief summation on the motivation as it was part of a greater cleanup and

rezoning effort in the area just south of the train station. He also briefly explained the rezoning process, including requirements for legal notices for public hearings and publications of legible maps. He also explained that the prior work done on rezoning Mill River Park did not consolidate the park's land parcels, so there is still additional rezoning work for this park. Mr. Blessing also used his brief slide presentation to show why the multiple Mill River Park land parcels create some difficulties for things such as building permit applications. His slide presentation also mentioned additional City of Stamford parks, such as Cummings Park West, Columbus Park, Veterans Park and Czescik Park.

Rep. Sherwood had questions regarding the Land Use Bureau's request to update all parks zoning to parks in the FY25-26 Capital Projects Budget, such as "Are all City owned parks on the list (for this rezoning project?" Mr. Blessing said there is a list of city-owned parks from the Land Use Bureau and one from the Administration which are being cross-referenced to ensure they capture all of the city owned parks when putting together the scop of work/list of parks for this Capital Project. There are some additional lists that may require also checking against to ensure they have captured all of the parks. There was a question about if there are any non-parks currently zoned as parks. Ms. McKenna said part of Scofieldtown Park is zoned as a park but is actually a Dept. of Public Works area. This is an example of something that can be resolved during the rezoning project.

Rep. Sherwood asked why something such as a partial park parcel being zoned to something like the Dept. of Public Works is not just resolved via the upcoming Master Plan process? Mr. Blessing explained that the Master Plan doesn't change zoning; it's more of strategic thinking and lists and outlines your ideas of what you want to do. The actual rezoning is the implementation side of the Master Plan. Rep. Sherwood said she understood this but meant can we use the Master Plan to call for the need of the parks rezoning project, to list the issue and call for it to be addressed. Mr. Blessing apologized if his prior answer did not completely answer her question and explained that even if that is done, the Master Plan categories do not have any direct legal bearing and is not legally binding; it's more of a vision statement.

Rep. Sherwood asked if the proposed Parks Rezoning Capital Project was brought to the attention of the administration; Mr. Blessing advised he had brought it up with Director of Operations Quinones and he was receptive to it. She then asked if it would be helpful for the Board of Representatives to send their support for this item in a Resolution to the administration? Mr. Blessing gave the example of the tree survey not going through until something similar was done, so he said yes, such an action would be helpful.

Rep. Sherwood had a question about what kind of deterrent from selling a piece of public property, like a park, is there? Wouldn't that park need to be rezoned before it could be sold? Mr. Blessing stated if you look at the City Charter and the State legislation about parkland and the disposition of parkland: Land dedicated as parks needs to be replaced on a one-to-one basis, of equal value (If you want to repurpose it). One of the very fundamental questions is: does a park need to be zoned a park to be designated a park, or is where that list designates all the parks sufficient?

Mr. Newman made a statement that this is part of the reason the Parks and Recreation Commission brought this issue forward to the Board of Representatives; to get the Land Use Committee, the Parks Committee and the Parks and Recreation Commission all together on the same page to do the same thing and support the Land Use Bureau as they move forward with this parks rezoning capital project.

Additional discussion continued between Ms. McKenna, Mr. Newman, Mr. Blessing and Rep. de la Cruz which included a statement thanking the presenters tonight for the explanation of the master plan process and the zoning process. It also included Rep. Kuczynski volunteering his involvement in the outreach to Redniss and Mead regarding potential pro bono work on this project if the Parks Commission feels it's appropriate. Regardless of that decision, he also asked if the Parks Commission would be willing to report back on this request at the next Parks & Recreation Committee meeting so the committee members can learn the results of those pro bono discussions. Ms. Hollas agreed to the request.

Ms. Hollas asked a situational question: What happens when a city property is zoned as a park and a non-profit wants to build a building there (in Scalzi Park particularly and also with the Arboretum)? Are there separate regulations? Or is this something that's dealt with on a case-by-case basis? Ms. McKenna gave some examples and instances that illustrated the standard has been leasing to the non-profits in such a case, but it is a very rigorous process.

Rep. Tomas asked a follow-up question on a similar line. Going back to the Arboretum and Nature Center: they're currently not zoned as parks and they hold certain functions there. If those are rezoned as parks, would they still do certain event functions that involve serving alcohol and having amplified music? Mr. Blessing stated this is an example of what he was referring to in detail during his presentation, of how there is a lot of research that needs to be done, in particular to the Stamford Museum and the Nature Center, as we don't want to put them in a box that makes it difficult for them to operate. Part of the research will be seeing what agreements are existing between those institutions and the City. The Bartlet Arboretum seems to predate everything, so this may provide an opportunity to really write down what they can and cannot do at the Arboretum and under what conditions rather than trying to make something up on an ad hoc basis. So for those instances where locations are not run by the Parks Department but instead by a third-party, there needs to be a lot of research conducted so the history of use and how it has been organized.

Chair Matheny asked what the Land Use Bureau needs from the Board of Representatives in her wrap up of the Review item and stated it sounds like they would like the support of the Board to get that initial \$100,000 to start the parks rezoning project in the form of a resolution of support. She asked then what the next steps are and is there anything else? Mr. Blessing stated the resolution of support is a great sign of support; he is also committing his department to do a bit more of the research he just alluded to and to keep the Board and the Parks and Recreation Commission in the loop of where the research is at. He hopes this will be a very collaborative project where the different boards work together.

Chair Matheny asked if it would be helpful, then, to keep this item open on the Pending agenda and have the Land Use Bureau return to provide an update in a few months or so. Mr. Blessing agreed that a quarterly update might make the most sense. Mr. Blessing asked if perhaps it could go to the February agenda instead considering the holidays may impede results for January.

A motion to recommit this item to the Steering Committee and revisit the item in the next quarter was made by Rep. de la Cruz (*in the Parks and Recreation Committee), seconded by Rep. Gilbride (Parks and Recreation committee member) and approved unanimously 4-0-0 by voice vote of Parks and Recreation Committee member Reps. (Reps. Matheny, de

la Cruz, Gilbride and Kuczynski in favor). Land Use/Urban Redevelopment Committee member Reps. did not cast votes.

Parks and Recreation Committee Chair Matheny adjourned the meeting at 8:26 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer Matheny, Parks and Recreation Committee Chair

This meeting is on [video](#).