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## **Minutes**

### **Parks, Arts & Culture Committee Meeting**

Wednesday, October 19, 2022, 4:00pm

**MEETING CONDUCTED IN PERSON AT BURLINGTON CITY ARTS, 2<sup>ND</sup> FLOOR, LORRAINE B GOOD ROOM, AND VIA ZOOM**

#### **Attendance:**

Committee Members: Chair Joan Shannon, Councilor Mark Barlow, Councilor Ali Dieng

City Staff: Cindi Wight – BPRW Director, Neil Preston – BPRW Lead Urban Park Ranger, Deryk Roach - BPRW, Lacey-Ann Smith – BPD, Scot Barker – Chief Innovation Officer, Holli Bushnell – BPRW Staff

Public – Carmen George, Michael Gaughn, Joel Baird, Lori Tepper, Katherine Kearny, Meg McGovern, Gail Rafferty, Amelia

Meeting called to order at 4:10pm by Chair Joan Shannon

#### **Approval of Agenda**

Councilor Mark Barlow moved to approve the agenda. Ali Dieng seconded, all were in favor.

#### **Approval of Draft Minutes from 9/28/2022**

Dieng moved to approve the minutes, Barlow seconded, all were in favor

Shannon provided background from previous meeting, reiterating some of the comments provided by Carmen George about the state of the Forever Young Treehouse as well as general comments about safety issues in city parks. She stated that BPRW has been doing yeomen's work trying to meet all the city's needs and explained that the committee will be receiving a full update from BPRW on the state of city parks. CIO Scot Baker will follow by providing information on the potential of a camera program. Public comment will follow the presentations.

#### **Safety and Competing use challenges in parks**

Cindi Wight, BPRW Director, took a moment to introduce Neil Preston, Lead Urban Park Ranger and note that Deryk Roach, Parks Maintenance and Operations Superintendent, was also present via zoom. Wight explained that the primary safety challenges faced in city parks include needles (an issue for both staff and members of the public), off-leash dogs, overcrowding (primarily car traffic), and lake health (bacteria blooms and messaging). Wight explained that she does not have safety data from BPD concerning camping in the parks. Wight is aware of the impacts on the BPRW side, but doesn't have data to back experiences from BPD. Wight has in the past asked BPD about safety on bike path at night, and at the time PD was able to confirm that the bike path was one of the safest places in the city.

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Wight went on to explain that competing uses for parks is a different issue from safety. For example, the bike path is used as both a daily transportation route as well as a recreational space, and those conflicting uses can cause issues. In the same vein, private events in parks compete with public use. This could mean that while one group might reserve a shelter for their private use, members of the public might still be using that shelter up to the reservation and may be hesitant or confused about having to leave. Wight continued by explaining that for some members of our community parks are their living room - the space where they spend all their time. Other folks drop in and out and visit parks for a specific reason or use.

### **Actions taken to address challenges**

Wight began by introducing the urban park ranger program, and provide some information on the programs they've been developing. Preston and his counterpart spend the majority of their time in parks building relationships with unhoused population. They have been focusing on engagement and education with enforcement being the last step in the plan. In addition the Urban Park Ranger Program, BPRW has added a facility rental system to the website which makes it much easier to reserve spaces and prevents some competing use issues. BPRW has added seasonal staff to be on site at the busiest parks during highest use periods. Finally, she explained that the city's see-click-fix system has effectively been providing internal work order and notifications to pertinent departments when members of the community make a report. This has been effective in resolving issues such as a found need or graffiti efficiently and rapidly.

### **Future action planned**

The first major action that BPRW will be taking is installing new gates at both North Beach and Oakledge. This should be completed by spring 2023. The general understanding is that there is too much night time traffic in these spaces (both parks are closed to car traffic after 9:30pm), and gates will help prevent cars from entering during prohibited times. The belief is that new gates at North Beach will also be helpful in off season when visitors are minimal.

Wight confirmed that the addition of cameras are another future action BPRW would like to take. In the past the city has been limited in terms of capacity and locations, but with the addition of 100 new cameras as approved by the city council BPRW will be able to move forward with camera installation at multiple recommended locations. BPRW has been meeting monthly with I&T, selecting locations and looking at potential hurdles to installation. Safety is highest priority in terms of camera placement.

Preston added that what he's most excited about is getting feedback from BPD and BFD. He commented that police calls to parks have decreased dramatically since 2017 (according to PD), but he is curious about to get that information from the fire department as well as their call volume might be much higher based on their required presence at all 911 calls. Preston hopes to get that information soon.

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Shannon commented that she doesn't think the PD call data is accurate because there's not always a physical response to call from PD anymore. She also noted that the public may see all kinds of things happening and no longer report those issue because they know no one will come out.

Barlow added that he hasn't heard about the normal amount of issues at Leddy Park this year and isn't sure what's causing the drop in problems. He hopes it's the work of the programs BPRW has been implementing.

**Limitations of Cameras and Cost of Camera (wifi v cellular, livecam v data storage only)**

Scot Barker, Chief Innovation Officer, explained that the camera system currently in place around the city is outdated if not virtually obsolete. The server was unable to handle any addition cameras and video and the entire backend needed to be replaced. I&T was able to update the server and systems and their work should provide another 7-10 years of fucitonality. There 203 cameras still out there working just fine even though they're older. I&T purchased 100 new (common, standard) cameras (not self-powered, no wifi). There is a need to replace 10-15 of the current cameras and I&T and BPRW have identified at least 12-15 new locations for cameras.

Barker explained that point to point cameras that use cell network exist, but the city did not purchase those as they cost around \$5000 each and that does not include installation, parts, or power). This would be the kind of camera needed because there is no internet and limited power that is not in proximity to the treehouse at Oakledge. In order to get network down there BT would need either trench or run .75 of a mile of cable from Austin Drive (the closest access point). If cameras were going to be installed there it would be a massive amount of work. That said, Barker will put a proposal together looking at the cost of getting cameras at the Treehouse should it be requested, however to install one camera there would likely cost between \$10,000 to \$15,000 considering the scope of what would need to be done. I&T could also look at a cell point to point camera, but those come with their own complications and, again, start at \$5000 without factoring power, upkeep, or installation costs.

**Public Comment**

Public forum was opened at 4:30pm

Michael Gaughn (sp?) is a resident of S. Winooski Ave and a member of planning committee. He feels that safety is a big concern in all parks, but more newsworthy things tend to catch the public and media's attention. Things that are important to him are a little outside what the committee has been discussing and include second hand smoke and drug use in parks. These things prevent him and his family from visiting these spaces presently. As cannabis use will likely increase in the coming years now that retail sales are legal, he worries that smoking will become worse in parks. He also reports that he has seen intravenous drug use in parks as well.

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Joel Baird. States that he walked through Smalley Park on his way into town the morning of the meeting. He saw a dozen or so daycare kids were playing in the same spot that tents were pitched over the summer. While there wasn't an interaction between the groups it concerned him to see children playing where there might be dangerous items left behind by campers. Baird asked if City Hall Park is monitored by PD or another department. He explained that the general public is routinely dismayed by the extremely poor, unpredictable, and potentially dangerous behavior that is easily observed by anyone entering the park. He notes that there is currently a proposed ordinance change that would eliminate the prohibition on camping in parks by, and that this change is supported by 2 city councilors. Baird asked if BPRW employees trained in social services and if it is or should be their job to help the unhoused. Baird also asked if See-click-fix feeds into data collection and if it can it be documented. He would like to know how see-click-fix is or might be folded into data collection. Finally, Baird asked if recording cameras could be used in places where internet and power are in short supply, explaining that he has his own camera which is rechargeable every 2 months, motion sensor operated, and provides infrared filming. While a camera like this wouldn't assist in preventing problems from happening, they would be helpful in observing issues.

Lori Tepper currently lives in South End and has for 40 years. Her home is next to Oakledge Park, near the treehouse. She walks through Oakledge a minimum of once a day and is grateful for the bike path and the beautiful park. She also expressed her happiness at the transformation City Hall Park underwent a few years ago and was delighted by the result of the work. However, seeing the state of CHP this summer was devastating. Tepper feels like she's pretty tough and fairly accepting, but she did not feel comfortable bringing her grandkids to City Hall Park when they visited over the summer. The tents and the large groups of unhoused individuals were spread out all over the park, using the whole space, and that made her uncomfortable. She didn't feel like she wanted to subject her grandkids to it and is a little embarrassed to admit that. She saw many individuals drinking out of paper bags, lots of women who were being verbally abused by their partners which disturbed her greatly, and tents spread out down both the St Paul and College St blocks of the park, completely overwhelming the space. She felt like the park was overtaken by a group of people who decided it was their space and not public. When Tepper encountered a man screaming at a woman, Tepper she stood with the woman and tried to protect her. Tepper wanted to help the woman and sought out PD or an Urban Park Ranger, but there wasn't anyone to help. This wasn't the only incident like this that Tepper experienced, but it was the worst. Because Tepper lives near the treehouse she's always helping to care for the space. For the most part she doesn't feel like the people near the treehouse are dangerous. The people being sketchy at Oakledge are in their cars in the back of the parking lot. That said, there are more people staying in Oakledge than she's ever seen before. Tepper suggests that citizens begin patrolling the park and notes that there are a lot of citizens who care about these spaces who will step up to help protect them.

Katherine Kearny lives on Caroline St. She notes that she came to listen and has never participated in a public meeting before. She echoes what others have said. Her neighborhood park is Callahan where

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there is an encampment of unhoused individuals. She hasn't had a negative interaction with the campers, but she has noticed increase traffic, trash, etc... Kearny would like to find a constructive way to help and she feels she's not alone in her desire to do so. She agrees that the BPRW staff are not social workers and it's not fair to saddle them with that work. She also feels that it's difficult to confront people who are under the influence, explaining that as she was on her way into the meeting she interacted with a woman and man drinking directly in front of the BCA entrance. Kearny doesn't have any solutions presently, but she wants to help. Kearny concluded by saying that it feels positive to have someone like Preston and his counterpart in the parks, taking the temperature, and seeing what's happening. It helps to have that understanding. Kearny feels that these are really complicated issues we're dealing with, but anything we can do to be empathetic and proactive is great.

Meg McGovern manages 131 Church St, has businesses downtown, and has lived in BTV for 35 years. A major issue she has encountered in the City Hall Park area is the open window wells around the building which have become filled with needles, feces, and various other detritus. McGovern asked to have a plastic cover installed over the window wells, but didn't happen. She has used her own camera and has brought videos of people breaking the law to police and has provided them with affidavits as well. She has seen people starting fires, breaking windows, and almost setting buildings on fire. Everyday there is drug dealing from the same 4 cars parked on St Paul Street. There's been lots of abuse of all kinds, fighting, shooting, death, even murder in City Hall Park. She feels the best course of action is to close the park at night and maybe even put up gates, and that will simply force the people there to disperse. McGovern also suggested moving the signage containing the rules and guidelines for the park from 10' down to 6' so that people can't ignore them.

Carmen George started by thanking the committee, BPRW, all other staffers who are involved with this issue. She reiterated her request for swift action to protect the treehouse. The treehouse is the first and only universally accessible public treehouse in VT and was the first and only in US when it was initially built. Today the treehouse would cost over \$200,000 to build. Tourists come to visit as well as community members, anyone can go there and that's what makes it beautiful. It's been vandalized repeatedly over the years and now the people living there prevent it from being universally accessible. She knows there's a huge issue with affordable housing and appreciates that it's something the city is working on, but people should not be living in the treehouse. That's not what it's for. BPRW is responsible for the care of treehouse and they're trying, but the graffiti just keeps coming back. Not one person has been caught or held accountable for the damage to the treehouse. George notes that there's a lot of money being invested in Oakledge, and she would like to see BPRW evaluate what it would cost, actual numbers, for cameras so she can fundraise if she needs to.

Gail Rafferty echoed most of what other community members had said. She made specific mention of the fact that the problem is not community members having to interact with people who don't look or act like them and was disturbed to think that's what BPRW imagines is the issue. She states that no one who lives near city parks is concerned by people who don't look or act like them. The concern is that

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there are people having sex in public in Smalley Park and the playground is being used to smoke meth. Other activities in parks that distress the community include gunfire or fighting in parks. It's reasonable to react negatively to this behavior, and Rafferty doesn't feel like she's out of line. Feels like the statement that people don't look or act like us is upsetting is a way of hitting our middle class guilt. Thinks cameras are a good idea but wonders if they'll even be safe if they're visible.

Amelia lives on Pine St on the South end across from Baird Park. She suggests that if Baird Park were to become more visible from Pine St and it would be less desirable for unwelcome uses. She'd like to see more people use it for positive things like Basketball and eating at picnic table, but no one can see the available space with hedges and low hanging trees. She feels that her neighborhood would be happy to do clean-up day at Baird if it help the park be better taken care of. She notes that her daughter found a bullet hole in the playground in May, and while the whole was sanded down, the hole is still there and is now large enough for a child's hand to pass through. Amelia has reported it and knows getting a replacement isn't easy. She has called PD several times in regards to illegal activity taking place in Baird park and has gotten the response that she can't report because she doesn't own or work for the park. She feels it's really frustrating when neighbors take pride in a park and the city doesn't.

Public forum closed at 5:12pm

### **Committee Discussion**

Dieng thanked everyone who came to the meeting and those who called in. He commented that the councilors have been hearing about problems in parks for quite some time. Dieng asked Wight if she could tell him who in PD stated that the bike path is the safest place in the city. Wight confirmed that it was acting Former Police Chief Jan Wright. Dieng noted that Wright has not been part of city government for several years now and that the information she provided Wight may have changed during the Pandemic. Dieng feels that there is a need for more data collection and would like information from see-click-fix incorporated too. He explained that the Initial concept for this meeting was to look into a pilot program for a livecam at the treehouse. He would like I&T to look into the cost for that from all angles.

Preston took an opportunity to explain that he feels there are 2 aspects to safety in the parks. He states that the unhoused community in our city through July was incredibly intense. That said, when he spent time with this community he was not in danger working with any of those folks at any time. There was not a time where his safety was threatened. There were times when he was uncomfortable and times when there was unpredictable behavior, but by sharing space and time with the community members he was able to meet them where they were. Preston feels the issues that the committee has been discussing are all the symptoms of a larger problem, not the problems themselves or the causes of the problems. He advocates for engagement and education instead of enforcement. As a city, we need to get a better handle on mental health and substance abuse issues or we're going to see more of this negative activity. If we close off areas because of safety the people in those spaces with nowhere else

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to go will be forced out into less safe situations. Preston has been trying to connect people to resources and build bridges. These people are our neighbors whether they're indoors or outdoors and if we don't connect to them in a positive way we'll continue to see them suffer.

Dieng asked if there has been a decrease in need since Preston started working with the unhoused population, and, unfortunately, Preston had to state that there are still no rooms at the Champlain Inn/A New Place and that people get turned away every day. He is encouraged by the pod installation and thinks it will help, but feels that we will still see people in parks.

Dieng asked Wight about the possibility of closing City Hall Park, and Wight confirmed that CHP is closed by city ordinance to people lingering there between 12am-6am but folks can still walk through. Unfortunately, this ordinance is not really enforced. In other parks certain activities, like Basketball for example, stop at 10pm. All other parks open to visitors at all times while restricting vehicle access at night. The three city cemeteries are also closed to visitors between dusk and dawn unless permission is otherwise granted by that office. Dieng returned that there is a problem if we have ordinances and don't enforce them. He feels the city needs to start thinking about solutions for spring 2023 now – perhaps a task force for public safety in parks starting spring 2023 or a plan for how they city is going to handle the influx of unhoused that arrive in the warmer months. Enforcement needs to be part of the plan.

Wight asked if the committee could clarify what kind of enforcement they are looking for and whether the issue is really public safety versus rule following. For example, it's not a safety issue if someone is just sleeping in a park, but it is against the rules. Should we really be enforcing that rule when that person has nowhere else to go?

Joel Baird interjected to note that Preston is no ordinary person – he is truly gifted at engaging with people who are at their worst. Most people when approached by someone who is altered get really freaked out and that's not an unreasonable response to someone in that state. People who are using are unpredictable and can sometimes sense when they can take out their troubles on public. That's not struggling, that's bullying.

Dieng commented that he understands Wight's point but also notes that we create rules and ordinances to be followed, implemented, and enforced. He feels that there needs to be a cooperative effort with CSLs or CSOs to make sure that relationships with the unhoused community are built so when we have to ask people to leave parks and enforce closure they'll comply. Wight states that she will be reporting what was discussed in this meeting with Parks commission. She hopes to see what we as a community want to see in parks and where our priorities are. Preston added that he appreciates the need for enforcement and that desire from the public, but he feels that there's enforcement and then there's our values as a community. When he asks someone to leave a space, knowing there is nowhere for them to go, it goes against our values as a community.

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Dieng stated that, speaking specifically to department heads as an elected official, the city creates rules to be enforced. If we want to bring morality in it we shouldn't be making any rules. The bottom line is that we have had murders and violence in our parks. We need to find a way to enforce our policies and ordinances.

Shannon concurred that the city does have rules that we have agreed to as a community; elected officials have created those rules and been endorsed by constituents. We do expect them to be enforced until/if and when we change them. There are obstacles to enforcing rules including PD capacity, but it's reasonable to try to figure out how to help out unhoused community members as we continue to enforce our existing rules. We need to find a way to help these people become compliant with our community expectations. We know the abuse, violence, gun violence and murders in our parks. We also know that drug dealing, use, and conflicts that come with use increase the chance of violence. Removing drug dealing/use from public spaces should make those spaces usable again. We have a rules restricting camping in public spaces for a reason. Burlington has always had people coming through living a vagrant life, and we have these rules so we don't allow people to consume these public spaces at the expense of others. Drugs in our parks present many safety issues. Health and safety are interrelated. We shouldn't have to walk through clouds of people using drugs and that's why we don't allow it. There are certainly larger problems like people just needing a place to go during the day, like at Callahan Park (as long as people are using the space within the rules). The issues is not people gathering but people misusing the spaces.

Barlow concurred that we have rules for a reason. He feels that what we're seeing in Downtown is the absence of enforcing those rules. From skateboards to open air drug dealing. He has had a person contact him in the park while he was trying to park his car to see if he was trying to reach her for a drug purchase. He has seen someone smoking a bong, people openly drinking, and others injecting drugs behind Whiskey Bar. It's going on openly and we're not enforcing our rules because these people are struggling. We need to find a way to address acute issues we're having in the city without trying to solve the broader, societal issues. He feels the city may lose our downtown if we don't start trying to solve this. Earlier in the month the city was unable to hold a scheduled event in City Hall Park because they were unable to contract a private security company for the event. Someone needs to enforce this stuff or we need to deter the activity somehow. If we had someone in the park to monitor the activity in the park we could deter negative behavior and as a result would start to see changes there. Barlow stated that he knows this isn't the most empathetic point of view, but these things can't be solved on the state level. If we solve these problems in Burlington we'll become a magnet for the unhoused. Resolution needs come on the state or regional level. If we have the services we'll get all the people and if we're going to do that we need to make sure we have rules that we enforce. It's a complicated fabric we're working in, but in regard to making the parks safe spaces that can be used by all we just have to start enforcing the rules. If we don't have the human capacity, he likes the idea of cameras, but likes the idea of closing certain spaces better. Gate off treehouse at night, encourage citizen involvement, see if there

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are people who could close and open treehouse every day, and gate off features in parks that where we want prevention. Barlow likes the idea of volunteerism in parks and wonders if the public could assist with remediating campsites (they do pose safety risks for park users because of refuse and debris).

Shannon asked what the committee felt were their best next steps. She suggested reaching out to try to hear from more people but also worried that more public input might just lead to rehashing the same things over and over again. She feels there needs to be work done on coming up with solutions. The committee gathered lots of good info at this meeting. Shannon wonders if it might be helpful to consolidate into 2 categories – what people are experiencing and solutions to problems. She also feels the whole committee has a desire for concrete numbers on incidents in parks. Additionally, she heard no objection to cameras in parks and mentioned a previous idea to add a livecam that could be monitored by the public to certain high risk areas (like the Treehouse). Baker noted that he will look into the cost of a livecam option.

Barlow asked if there were civic groups that act as stewards to certain areas of the city, and Wight confirmed that there are several. While it does take people to manage these groups, they are extremely effective. Wight also promised to look into the bullet hole in the slide at Baird and noted that the city intends to move the City Hall Park signage lower and add more inclusive language and images to make the rules more understandable to all. Baird Park will also be receiving a new comprehensive plan in the near future.

Dieng stated that he would like to have more solutions to these issues by the next meeting. He wants to get an idea on what can be enforced, who is going to enforce it, and when enforcement will start. He feels there is a large need for community engagement and wonders if an ad hoc committee with community members and professionals who can speak to all the various issues in the parks might be viable. This committee would provide real recommendations that the city can do by the spring. This group would come together to bring ideas from across the full spectrum of the city's population.

Shannon asked that Dieng's idea be developed further in next meeting. She asks that councilors review notes and try to put together an issues and a solutions list. The next PACC meeting will be scheduled by doodle poll and will continue to focus on safety in parks. She noted that Wight will be away for the first three weeks in November. Preston noted that PD should be present at the next meeting to help discuss enforcement.

#### **Actionable Items for next meeting**

The next PACC meeting will be scheduled via doodle poll.

#### **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 6:05pm.