



**PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION
Minutes
August 14, 2024
Parks and Recreation Commission**

Commission Present: Boehm, Johnson, Keech, Lantieri and Morrigan

Not Present: Bergmann, Etter

Staff Present: Wight, Moreau, and Bushnell

The meeting was convened at 5:40 p.m.

Approval of Agenda

Morrigan moved to amend agenda to move item 2.6 to deliberative so he can recuse himself due to new employment causing a conflict of interest. Lantieri seconds, and all were in favor. Morrigan moved to accept the amended agenda, Keech seconded, and all were in favor. Keech moved to add the minutes from June 11 to the deliberative agenda, all were in favor

Approval of Consent Agenda

Keech moved to approve the consent agenda,

Mayor's Update

Mayor Emma Mulvaney-Stanak introduced herself and asked everyone present in the room to introduce themselves as well. Once introductions were made, Mayor Mulvaney-Stanak began to talk about her first four months in office. The mayor's emails have been trying to communicate as much as possible. Her first 3 months in office were all about the budget - making sure it was community safety forward and balanced. Safety touches every aspect of the city and every staffer and community member is impacted. The community has been clear on their priorities for the budget, and Mulvaney-Stanak has already planned a budget summit for the end of month to start planning for next year. She wants to add public engagement to the budget process. She feels the current system is too short, and intends to do something different.

Beyond that Mulvaney-Stanak's administration has been focused substance use, unhoused issues, and criminal/negative activities impacting community life. The administration been hard at work – focusing on 6 or so “hot spots” and getting more accountability in locations where there are the most issues. These “hot spots” are points for cross departmental collaborations, bringing as many staff members as necessary at the table and providing feedback. For example, the day of the meeting, the Burlington School District was in hot spot meeting to talk about starting school. They are looking at other cities with similar struggles to build a more effective system. Ingrid Jonas has also joined the team to work specifically on community safety. She is retired state trooper, works with CJC, and is a great asset for the city. Mulvaney-Stanak is also working to restaff PD, hire 10 new officers and 3 more CSOs.

Most relevant to the Parks commission is the work Mulvaney-Stanak's administration is doing on unhoused issues. They've been working on how to tackle the issue with dignity and care for folks struggling. There is a massive gap between the state's responsibility and funding limits. There is literally



nowhere for these people to go. There are not enough beds in the state for the homeless and Chittenden County and Burlington in particular have the highest number of unhoused in the state. The motel program ends in September, and as weather gets worse there are fewer protections than there used to be – there's a high bar to get emergency housing during adverse weather issues now which didn't used to exist.

Mulvaney-Stanak's administration is trying to be thoughtful around shared space – They want visitors and locals to enjoy our public spaces, so the city has decided to move folks out of parks while allowing them to stay on public lands. There are three locations on public land where the city has installed basic amenities (bathroom, dumpsters, water for hand washing). Two sites with resources are flying A at the waterfront and in the urban reserve. Things have been stable in those locations and staff are monitoring these sites. Ultimately, however, camping is not the best practice. The administration is working with a CEDO staffer whose only focus is to end homelessness on adding more beds. The third site is on "Old Dump Road" heading into the Intervale. The administration hasn't placed resources there yet because councilors really wanted a dialog with the surrounding community. There are regular encampments at bottom of hill, but criminal activity is happening at top of hill. Ultimately, however, this is only a warm weather strategy and we need more beds for winter. This is imperfect at best, but it's what Mulvaney-Stanak's administration has been trying to navigate.

Morrigan thanked Mulvaney-Stanak for the update, sharing that he was thrilled with the work that's been done. He was very encouraged to know that no employees were eliminated in the budget crunch and appreciates what's been done with unhoused population. This issue is very close to his heart as he was unhoused for a period of time. There are people who understand why amenities are helpful (city employees have to deal with it anyways, at least it can be more properly disposed of). The bathroom issue is always present because as long as we have unsheltered people using substances, they are in a constant state of withdrawal or improving. These conditions cause many digestive issues. People getting off drugs have less than 30 seconds sometimes from feeling the need to go to defecating. We have people living unsheltered who cannot control their bowels. That's the reality. It's hard to hear people talk about fecal urgency as a political matter.

Mulvaney-Stanak appreciated Morrigan's perspective and agreed that sharing lived experience helps to educate the community about the realities. Stories/experiences like Morrigan's are important. Bathroom access is an equity issue. Her administration is looking for short term, immediate, straightforward ideas to resolve the issues we've been having, and one is to make more public bathrooms available. There is a bathroom in city hall that people don't know about. Mulvaney-Stanak also pointed out that children also experience bathroom urgency. It doesn't matter who you are, we need to do better. The goal is to move from a place of questioning what can be done to a place of proactivity.

Keech admitted that he feels ignorant about temporary shelter situation. He asked what the priorities might look like when things improve. Mulvaney-Stanak shared that there is a popular myth that Vermont has a lot of out-of-staters in our unhoused population, but that's not true, it's mostly Vermonters. It's very hard to find an emergency shelter bed in rural VT. There's no transportation or downtown grocery store in many local locations. Additionally, there is ongoing tightening in states general assistance housing emergency program. Everyone who wanted to be housed could be housed during Covid, but now policy is going the other way. The number of unhoused in Chittenden County are



higher now than at the start of Covid - over 300 unhoused people in Chittenden County alone. Most need low barrier sheltering – meaning no sobriety or other high bar requirements. We need more low barrier shelters. There is a problem with adverse weather program – requiring recipients to be elderly; even families becoming ineligible. The state has implemented an 80 day cap on motel program. It's very concerning how many folks are getting pushed out.

Boehm asked what parks commissioners should be thinking about in terms of seasonal movement.

Mulvaney-Stanak shared that staff is looking to get more emergency beds online, low barrier in particular. They are looking for a location for emergency winter shelter as VFW is no longer in location. The city isn't equipped to provide these services, but we are holding these people regardless. We're looking for sites for winter shelter. The old federal social security building on Pearl Street is a likely option, but they are looking at many sites as possible shelters. Unfortunately, there aren't a ton of options that feature everything we need to house folks over the winter. Even if we had millions of dollars out of nowhere, it's going to take a couple of years to get through this, so it's important to get ahead of the game as best possible. Ultimately, all of these issues are unintended consequences of the pandemic.

2.6 (moved from Consent) Request for Special Use Permit and Sound Waiver for VT Progressive Party Gathering at North Beach Shelter

Morrigan reiterated that he is now an employee of the Progressive party so he recused himself from vote. A motion to approve special use permit and sound waiver gathering at North Beach was requested. Lantieri moved, Keech seconded, and all were in favor

Minutes approval

Keech noted that page 4 notes that he stated "all know his stance on the dog task force." He asked to add word negative to clarify stance, otherwise he would like the statement stricken. He moved to make the edit. Lantieri seconded, noting that the minutes will need to be approved at the next meeting. All were in favor

Public Forum

Public forum opened at 6:21pm. As no one was present or wished to speak public forum was also closed at 6:21pm

Swim Water Update Process

Erin Moreau, harbormaster and Department of waterfront superintendent was present to explain the new swim water update reporting system. The waterfront team oversees all municipal beaches and swim waters and it's their job to inform public of the water status daily. Cyanobacteria is the reason we often close the beaches and it's not going away. We needed to make things more formal than just updating on social media like we used to, so over the winter we partnered with the state to build a Burlington version of the statewide swim water page. We mirrored it for just Burlington beaches and now it's a home where people can go consistently and check the status of the beaches. Both a great interface for the public and also a really simple way to understand access – it uses traffic light colors to indicate safety (green means go, yellow – proceed with caution, red – stop) which is very understandable. On the back side, we are able live update the page throughout the day. We have two designated seasonal employees whose only job is to test the water all day long. Every beach updated a



minimum of 2 times daily, providing more info for the public and more data for us (and UVM – the Lake Champlain basin program has researchers who are working on cyanobacteria). Overall, it's been a huge improvement.

Moreau continued by explaining the process for closing a beach. Staff tests for e coli in water from the harbormasters boat 2 times weekly. This is not ideal because it takes about 20hrs for results (that's how long e coli tests take). Moreau is hoping that now that the waste water department is testing for Covid, it may translate to other improvements. The team tests for e coli on Monday and Thursday (results Tuesday and Friday). Cyanobacteria, on the other hand, is checked by seasonal employees daily. Up until this year, we had 2 options, category 1 (no problems) and category 3 (close the beach). We've now added category 2 which means giving the public more info to make informed decisions. Category 2 is a "warning" for issues. If we see algae starting to form we used to close at that point, now we use a category 2 as a middle range, basically meaning If you could ingest it, take caution. We'll also put staff at the site to monitor the bloom, and if it gets any closer to a category 3 we close it.

This year, we had a total of 8 failed tests, either e coli or cyanobacteria. That's different than amount of beach closure days. We did that 8 times this year so far and had 29 category 2 cyanobacteria warnings (these are done by the beach). This information really impressed Moreau as she thought she'd see a lot more full closures and fewer warnings. Flooding this year has made the lake act differently than any other year. There were 10 total days that beaches were closed this year, and that was actually for e coli. Compared to 2023, 29 cyanobacteria failed tests (closures) and 40 closure days for cyanobacteria and 1 for e coli. They are seeing less lake blooms in general this year let alone blooms that close the beaches for days. We have seen a flux in lake temperature every time we get a flood event, lowering the overall temperature. That might have something to do with lack of blooms this year, and this has been noted state wide.

Keech asked, if e coli testing takes 20 hours, how long does it take to measure cyanobacteria, and Erin shared that it can be done 3 ways, but mostly it's measured visually by staff who have been trained to spot by state. Keech asked if this was done in a vehicle or on bikes, and Moreau confirmed that it's primarily done on bikes except when they take electric carts in morning to help haul trash. If striations are scene in the water column they will do a scoop test (must be done after 10am). If they close a beach, they will not reopen until they do a strip paper test which comes from state and tests for harmful chemicals in cyanobacteria blooms. They won't reopen until chemicals aren't present. Keech asked if alerts can be added to the city homepage and Moreau confirmed that this is part of their next steps.

Moreau added that the environment changes constantly. Staff will be working on things like adding information to the city homepage in the off season. Additionally, the city is getting new website overall, and the BPRW waterfront update is coming mid-october. Moreau has been in conversation with DPW and IT, with the goal to make it like state page but with a little more control over changes. IT is working to replicate page and there could be more changes coming. They want to put out QR codes on permanent beach signs, but if we're about to change the coding we can't do it yet. What's not captured in swim water updates is what DPW does. We need to own that we're recreational water folks even if issues aren't our faults. Want to make sure the reason for things happening is clearly indicated. If we want the public to come to us for that knowledge we need to own that knowledge. Luckily we haven't had to close for a CSO, but we're working to find a way to indicate it. It's growing and we're trying to stay one step ahead of things.



Boehm shared that nice that the page is the same as the states as it makes it easier for visitors to understand. Moreau added that we would have joined state system, but we update more often and state doesn't update on the weekends. This is how we build community trust, by providing all the info we have.

Public Comment Approach

Morrigan began by asking Keech, who originally requested the item, to share his reasoning behind the request. Keech explained that, 2 months ago, 2 people came in for public comment which is a pretty rare thing to happen. Because it's rare, Keech really wants to embrace these people. The policy is to listen and have no dialog, but Keech doesn't like that. He understands why that's the case with city council, but parks commission see people on much smaller scale. He feels it's a disservice to public if we let people speak and don't respond. Because of the rules, he couldn't ask for details from the last public forum visitors, so the committee could help rectify their situation. Ultimately, Keech emailed with these people and found that they felt that the commission doesn't respond or take action when they come in. The public is expected to write us to get follow up and they have a right to a response. The department should lay out facts for everyone and Parks commission should deliberate. We should be learning from these situations too. We should know what these rules are. The public deserves to learn why choices were made/rules exist, and commissioners need to know these things. These rules don't serve the public and something needs to change. There isn't a mandatory response or an insured discussion next meeting, and Keech found it embarrassing that they couldn't respond.

Morrigan asked for suggestions of what we should do going forward and Keech shared that he would like commissioners to be able to ask questions and have dialog. While the public doesn't have a right to the response they want, they do deserve a response.

Morrigan likes the idea of follow up. At City Council the public fills out sign in sheet, parks commission can use that to follow up. If this is what we want to do when someone comes in follow ups should be decided before the end of the meeting. He cautions on holding a dialog because there are circumstances in which it could become very problematic. Public meetings can really go off the rails when people come and use forum to derail discussion. Even if they don't have a malicious intent, if there's a back and forth things can get out of control quickly. He thinks having comment is good and follow up is good, but we have met our obligation as officials without opening dialog. He is very wary, especially as chair, but this is a discussion and can be voted on next month if need be.

Keech, on the other hand, was open to experimenting. With so few people coming per year it doesn't seem like it would hurt. If we're choosing to keep things the same way, he would like to have the department provide explanations of why things are the way they are or we can let them know we'll explore topic further.

Wight shared that the commission builds the agenda every month. When these things happen we can discuss at commission time and request to add to agenda. Morrigan asked Keech to put together proposal for new procedure, and he agreed to do so, noting it might take more than a month. Morrigan agreed to table it next month if Keech does not have time to complete the proposal.

Standing Items:



Park Foundation Update

The Parks Foundation does not meet over the summer and will not be meeting until September.

Off-Leash Dog Sub-Committee

The application to join the committee has been digitized and the team was planning to pick new members the day of the meeting, but decided to push back a month to see if they can get more applications. They are adding 2 more members of the public to the committee. Wight provided new commissioner Boehm with an explanation of the work of the sub-committee - 2 commissioners and 2 members of the public will create recommendations for Parks committee which will then vote and send recommendations to City Council. The application will be sent to commissioners as soon as it is posted.

Director's Items

Wight shared her hopes that commissioners had a chance to read the monthly report. One thing that didn't make it into the report is that from 10 until noon on Saturday Burlington School District will be holding a celebration of Olympic bronze medalist in women's rugby 7s, Ilona Maher. It is a civic ceremony so it doesn't require parks commission approval.

Wight also provided an update on the work being done to recover from the most recent storm. Teams have been incredible cleaning up from storm, including central facilities, but especially arborists.

She gave a special kudos to the Great Lakes Fishery Commission who provided \$100,000 for trips and other summer programming.

Wight mentioned that Champ camp has as many kids on wait list as there are spots available. They are looking to expand for next summer by adding a second location.

Arena changes from staff has brought in additional money and Central facilities has looked into other suppliers to save money as well.

Finally, Wight shared that they are looking for volunteers for Wag the Waterfront – looking for licensing volunteer specifically.

Commissioner's Items & Volunteer Hours

Morrigan had 5 hours this month. He shared that he has changed his pronouns to he/him, and added that he is totally patient if people need some time to adjust. Transitioning at 40 isn't super easy, but one rewarding thing was that he moved to Burlington because it's the first place he ever felt safe as a queer person, first place so open and accepting. He's grateful to have come to this place while living here.

Lantieri was pleased to announce that the Champlain Street Park is now open! It's been 5 years in the works and goes to show the dedication of BPRW staff, especially Max Madelinski and the grounds crew. There's still a little more work to be done, but it's open and wonderful! Lantieri had no parks volunteering this month, but got his place of employment to sponsor a block party!

Boehm, as a brand new commissioner, took this moment to introduce herself. She has lived in Burlington for 9 years in the South End. She has 9 and 6 year old boys who use parks and programs.



Boehm works for VSAC and has served on ward 5 NPA with Lantieri. She feels park spaces are so important for kids and family, and is excited to learn more and see where she can plug in.

Aaron was able to report 2 volunteer hours.

Executive Session

Morrigan called for a move to executive session. Lantieri moved, Keech seconded, and all were in favor.

Adjournment

Motion to adjourn at 7:47 p.m., the motion carried unanimously.

DR