

Mills Park Community Meeting #2

Date: October 8, 2008

Location: Pleasant Home, 217 Home Avenue

Time: 7pm

Mr. Gary Balling, Executive Director of the Park District of Oak Park, opened the meeting and welcomed the attendees. He spoke about the overall planning process for our parks and gave background on the work to date. He briefly reviewed the Mills Park planning process to date and then introduced the members of Altamanu Inc. and Terra Engineering who were to facilitate the meeting. Mr. Balling introduced Park District Staff and members of the Park District Citizen Committee who were in attendance. Mr. Balling provided a synopsis of the previous focus group meetings through the community meeting process.

Mr. Balling requested a show of hands of who in the audience had been at the previous meeting. Approx 50% of the people present were at the previous Community Meeting (#1). Gary then introduced invited presenters from PADS.

Linda Schuler and Sheri Hackett from PADS gave a short presentation explaining the mission of PADS and how they work with the homeless.

- PADS provide services to homeless individuals and families, providing an emergency overnight shelter. PADS began in 1992 as a grassroots effort, and over the period of 17 years grew to a staff of 16 people. Various programs provide housing and prevention services. They currently serve 500 individuals a year in their emergency shelters. PADS does not have a single permanent facility in the western suburb/Oak Park area, but work in conjunction with the Faith communities which provide them with rotating nightly shelters.
- Police, libraries, and social service agencies refer Individuals to them. They distribute cards that show shelter locations. You can make referrals to their agency located in Maywood. Shelters are open from 7:30 pm to 7am in the fall, winter and spring.
- People at the shelters receive hot dinners which are donated and served by volunteers. There is a year round, 5 day a week daytime support program which people can attend. People have access to showers and other care.
- Eighty five percent of the people who utilize the night program are also served in the daytime support program (roughly 400 people).
- Transitional housing services are provided along with 31 scatter site apartments. There is also permanent support housing with 30 scatter site apartment units which are dedicated to the mentally ill.

- Their goal is to provide the mental y ill, working poor, families, and the drug addicted with a place to go.
- Outreach is done 7 nights a week in the emergency shelter. Moto is not to manage homeless, but try to address the issues.
- Emergency shelters are dependent on volunteers and congregations donating their space. It is in the strategic plan to expand the emergency shelter during the summer months. The shelter currently operates from September 15 to May 15.
- PADS always need volunteers. PADS does outreach and tries to engage the homeless to use their services.

Gary then introduced an invited representative of the local Police Force to speak.

Paul Razzino, the Beat Cop, gave a short explanation of what he does for the community. He's been a police officer for 8 years, and is an active part of the community. His mother live in Mills Park Tower, and he walks through the park every time he visits her.

The primary problems he sees in Mills Park are the homeless people and people drinking in the park. When they see it, they write tickets, which requires the people to appear in court. There is an ordinance against drinking in the park.

When the police deal with rowdy kids they typically tell them to go to the park and play.

Unfortunately people call and complain when these people are in the park. You can go to the park and play but there are inappropriate ways to act in the park. Public swearing and being too loud are unacceptable, including being over age on public play equipment.

One police officer handles mostly community related issues, and if it takes 2 days to return your call, it is typically because there are bigger things going on in the community. As much as I'd like to be in this park a lot, I can't always be here. I guarantee you will get someone over here if you get citizen involvement. I go to many community meetings/block parties and hear about complaints and dislike hearing severe incidents without being told previously. We are here to serve; we really are, if you call us we are going to respond. People sitting in the park have constitutional rights, but if you call and say someone looks suspicious, they can use that call to get contact with that person. No call is too small, call 386-3800 for Paul Razzino

Gary then introduced an invited representative of the Youth Township Interventionist Team

Burt Patania works with the youth in the community. Works with the kids who are causing a lot of problems and are the knuckle heads. If you see kids causing problems, hear them getting loud, if they are approachable use your instincts. If they continue to be a problem let the people at Pleasant Home know, or give the police a call, they will call Burt. They do a lot of outreach to the parks, schools, all involving inter governmental agreements. Wherever there are kids is where they are going to be. Things they need to know about is who when and where; are they the same kids coming all the time? what are they doing? what are they saying?

The big issue is you should be willing to sign a complaint which allows them to follow up. The follow-up can be done at school, with counselors, social workers etc. The first step is to notify police and provide a good description. Don't take any risks on your own. They will talk to the kids, and communicate with other people, and provide them with correct behavior at the park. Intensive up close one on one attention is given to the parent's and at school, etc. Ask for Burt when you call.

Is there a curfew in Oak Park?

There is a state curfew and an earlier curfew for the parks in the area. Typically the crime is done late at night.

Diane will post all contact information on the Park District website.

The parks in Oak Park close at 10 o'clock and the playgrounds close at sunset.

This time is posted in some parks.

Last meeting I made the comment about the use of the term gang bangers, I wondered if Burt or the officer could comment on the frequency of gang bangers using our parks. It's my impression that they are typically unruly youth.

Police Officer Razzino: I very rarely run into kids who are in gangs, there are typically more wannabes. Rarely do I find parks and gangs to be affiliated. Usually they are just kids wanting to get away from parents.

Burt explains that he is the person who works with gangs. There are no gangs in Oak Park. The way we define gangs is a group of organized individuals committing crimes to hold turf. There are no gangs in Oak Park or River Forest. Are there kids who are in gangs, yes? Our kids go to other towns for drugs; those kids come here because this is where the money is at.

Kids in gangs tend to stay over on the Austin border. We don't see a lot of that in here. There are no huge issues with that when it comes to large groups.

I find a lot of people label kids as gang bangers just because of the way they are dressed.

How is safety related to the design of the park?

Lighting, if the fence should be opened or not, should there be benches, should there be a path that police can drive on? Should this be a park with benches? It's an issue. I'm assuming that the idea of removing the fence will increase safety.

Now the benches are over by Mills Tower and the trouble makers are over there now. That is where all the commotion is now. Now the homeless people have nowhere to sit but by Mills Tower and that is not fair.

How many people are interested in a meeting on park safety and security, a small smattering of hands?

If it's after 10 o'clock always call.

John Mac Manus of Altamanu Inc. then made a presentation.

Josephine Bellalta of Altamanu Inc. made a presentation on the trees in the park, identifying which are historic and the condition of the trees. There are a few trees in poor condition but only one, an Ash at the SE corner of the park, that should be removed.

John continued with the presentation and attendees make the following comments:

In addition to benches and chairs please include picnic tables.

Currently when we call the police at 2am, they drive into the park and flash their lights at the people drinking on the benches. Please provide access for the police to do this.

I think the park has a lot of charm and think that if we add concrete and paths, it will lose that charm.

Why do some of the trees have orange markings on them? The ribbons are marking memorial trees.

People don't need paths to enjoy the park.

What about the handicapped?

Can you recreate the desire lines (paths worn into grass and soil) with a material other than concrete? Please consider maintenance and environmental issues.

Mike Grandy of the Park District explains that the park district cannot maintain the current pathways in the winter by plowing. The addition of paths will slightly change the character of the park, but will provide better access for people to move across the park.

I would like to see the concrete paths kept narrow.

I do not want to see a lot of paths but I would like to have the two paths that are cut into the grass made into ADA paths. I'd also like to see a ramp by the stairs.

Is there any way to know if people will use the new concrete paths? What if people make new desire lines?

Would you show the schematic you had up earlier that is a little more formal? Will the desire line go away if someone can use the more formal rectilinear path?

Will the opening on the east side of the park lessen the need for the desire line to Pleasant Home?

I see Concept 2 as being very desirable, I like how it retains the formality of the park and provides access to Home Avenue. I believe more people will use the north south path and then cross over.

I think the winding path with benches will provide a way for seniors to enjoy a natural setting. You can even fill in the space with natural vegetation and more Oak trees. I think the wide

expanses of grass are underutilized. You could also have educational programs in there and create habitat for birds and butterflies.

You could use putting green type surface in place of the paths. They are wheelchair accessible and would stave off the concrete and salt issues. The maintenance would be an issue though; someone would have to maintain the green. I think it's important to keep a place holder for the fountain.

I think that by providing opportunities for people to better utilize the park will bring good things to Mills Park and the community. These enhancements can be done with respect to the historic fabric as well as enhance the natural areas in the park. I feel the fence is intimidating and would like to see an opening in it. I think this will create a handicapped accessible entrance. I think you can subtly create a path system with a minimal amount of paths. It is helpful to see the use of the paths identified (vehicular, secondary etc.) We are lucky to have this much land available. Recognizing the historic layout that did extend to the south of the house is important.

I agree that the park is underutilized. Can you explain to me why the fence on the west side of the park is not historic? That fence feels like the walls of a prison to me. It took me a while to realize I could actually go into the park and that it was a public space. I believe having more people in the park will make it a safer place. I'd like to see that fence removed.

That fence is a Mills era feature historically speaking.

I'm worried that putting an opening on Home will become a commuter cut through. The fence at the corner of Pleasant and Marion is a relatively short fence (south) that is relatively recent; you shouldn't necessarily trash that one.

If you provide views into a park it entices people to come into the park.

I go to the park to be in a natural environment, a place to get away from concrete.

Is the fountain a foregone conclusion?

John responds that the fountain was the most popular thing in the last meeting and on our questionnaire.

People have talked about the possibility of a playground and water feature around here?

It's likely a fountain will need to be donated as it will be an expensive addition to the park.

I enjoy the grass in the park; it's nice to walk your dog in it.

Will the steep grade change from the hill to the gate make a connection there difficult?

I would like to see the park be grass and trees.

I don't want people to simply use the park as a pathway to go from Marion to Home. That will bring a lot of foot traffic to the park.

I don't want people to walk through our park.

Is it a bad thing that people walk through our parks?

I mean as it is now people go there to relax and enjoy and we don't have a lot of commotion of people passing through.

The walk by the existing drive on Marion is a scary walk.

I walk to the north entrance. I like the one on the right. The loop, take it or leave it. She likes the connection to the north side. She wants a version of the loop and one without the loop. Does anyone else feel strongly about fencing off the car access and garage and making a new entry way to the south?

Are there any other choices?

Why not fence it off with a decorative fence and ivy.

How long does he have the easement?

I agree with the lady who said that it's better not to have a lot of traffic through the park; people shouldn't be using the park as a pathway.

I see the fence as protection because it keeps people out.

I enjoy cutting through the park because it is a wonderful thing to experience. This will make the park safer as there are more eyes monitoring the park.

I want to reiterate the same comments that apply to Home; to create a welcoming entrance is not out of character with the intent of the park and the historic nature, which would be a very positive thing. Whether you accomplish that by purchasing the property and eliminating the easement issue, perhaps that goes away and we can use that historic opening etc. I think at the same time you can do that while respecting the genuine historic fabric that actually is, but you can still make a welcoming entrance there etc.

John asks: Who would like to see a new opening with a lower fence on Marion?

Majority of attendees raise their hands in support.

If this man has an easement we'd have to buy it off of him.

A lot of people like the idea of fencing off this driveway and creating a new opening.

What about not having a fence along Marion?

There is a small show of hands.

There are difficult grades currently there.

Wouldn't a sign help people understand that this is a public park, not private property? We could just put a sign on the fence.

What lessons can you take from Austin Gardens that can be applied to Mills?

Carol Yetken who worked on Austin Gardens: the overall naturalistic character of the park is one thing that is uncommon. Austin Gardens is a designed park for use specifically as a public park. The fence there is not historic and was added in the 1980's. The openings were planned and fit with the village grid and the pathway system supports the openings. Recently a soft surface pathway was implemented at the end of Ontario as there was a pretty serious desire path in there.

John says that he hears people say they don't want to bring more people into the park which is contrary to the fact that Mills Park is in one of the most densely populated areas in Oak Park. Emergency vehicles access Mills Park from the North side.

I don't want to see any children's play equipment in the park. The kids I take care of call it the grass park and I love the naturalistic quality it has.

I am glad you were going to reserve a zone for the future. I'd like to maintain an original opening on the north and make a connection to the other area. I agree it could be acceptable to those of us thinking about the historic plan because of the later nature of this fence. To say that one of those has to be a vehicle entrance, whether it is straight or curved is for later decision. I love the idea of the historic fountain, if you don't commit to the flower garden, would the grade allow a barrier free access from the flower garden to the fountain? Is it straight down or ARE steps or ramps required? Our problem is the mature trees around this; you'd have to build the fountain on the original elevation.

I'm very much in favor of one entrance to the south (east), and a path connecting to the fountain.

If you can plan on a connection from north to south, keep the classic set of walks and save some as we need both of them.

Why would we fence off the only opening (on Marion) just to make a new opening to the south? John responds by saying that if we don't fence off the easement, people will continue to use it as an entrance and it defeats the purpose of changing the access point.

Why don't we just make the easement more attractive and continue the path straight across the park? That would create a nice formal entry.

I think you shouldn't have to pave the desire line, leave it alone.

People who want to trudge through the snow will do that but you can keep that path going.

I see people using that path every morning while I practice yoga in the park. I like the path that goes all around Austin Gardens.

An attendee comments on the park survey carried out a few years ago. There was a survey done to find out what people really needed and wanted. The most important thing was small neighborhood parks; there is no doubt that this is a good reflection of that desire. The second most important thing to people was paved walking and biking trails where people wanted more opportunity for people to walk etc. There is a strong desire for people to have some way to walk freely in an interior walkway system.

Yes I think there should be good paths to walk on.

It's very important for us to keep a system of pathways with access to the house to bring all of people who walk through the park to look around and use the house. It's important to keep access to the park.

We are here every day and we hear it every single day; this pathway should be paved. This should be a solid pathway, etc.

Cement isn't good for seniors' joints; can it be an asphalt path?

Mike Grandy of the Park District comments: From a buildings and ground stand point, concrete is better. From an aesthetic point of view and from a wear point of view, concrete is better. I have people in walkers and wheelchairs, skateboards, moms, and I have to serve everybody so I have to come up with something.

Can you stain the concrete with an ochre color?

Yes you can stain it many colors.

You have to respect the fact that there are people who are living along the park and this is their front yard, not their backyard. Their entire windows face the park. We spent many years with the police and rowdy youth etc. I like the idea in Austin Gardens with groundcover and plantings and keep people a landscape buffer away from the edge of the property line. I fought vehemently when those mulberry trees were torn down.

What path system would you like to see?

I think that the more people who use the park, the more problems we will have. Many people already use this park.

You know what this is? A neighborhood park; not just your park; it is a neighborhood park that every tax payer is paying for improvements for. Last time I was here and started to approach the subject of a playground, I actually had someone come up to me and say to me why don't I walk down Randolph and go to the one in Forest Park. My taxes reflect that I pay for a lot of parks and I pay for this park to be maintained and improved. And the idea that we will have too many people walking down here sounds very rude. What I hear you saying is that this is an underutilized park.

This park should be usable year round, pave the pathways so they can be used rain or shine, and by anyone. I'd like to see the pathways acknowledge the possibility of the coach house (Stables) and other pieces of the historic template restored.

The Mills Park Survey (questionnaire) had mostly positive responses regarding the Pavilion.

Gary Balling announced that at the next meeting Altamanu will come back with more ideas, drawings and vignettes and we are going to refine the path systems and move on to the playground. The next meeting is here on Wednesday November 12. He then thanked all for coming.