



Mills Park Site Plan Community Meeting #1

Location: Pleasant Home, 217 Home Street

Date: September 17, 2008

Time: 7pm

Minutes of meeting

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 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 Citizens Committee who were in attendance. Mr. Balling assured the public that they would have many opportunities to give their input to the planning process.

There hasn't been a master plan completed for Mills Park since 1967.

What we hope to do tonight is to get your input and talk about some of the ideas we have discussed in Focus Group Meetings.

As we tried to begin gathering ideas and also orientating the park planners we met with representatives of the village, of local businesses, residents of Mills Tower and talked to members of the Pleasant Home foundation.

He then introduced Altamanu and Terra, the Engineering consultants

He assured the meeting that the process was completely open.

If you have neighbors who can't make the meeting tonight and would like to follow this process you can go on the park district website at www.oakparkparks.com. Go to future plans, click on Mills park and it will give you up to date information.

Mills Park is about 4.5 acres; it's considered a passive park within our system and Pleasant Home is an historic property.

We have a very extensive interest in our historic properties.

Pleasant Home is operated by the Pleasant Home Foundation, a non-for-profit foundation which has an agreement with the Park District.

The Historical Society also works out of Pleasant Home.

Park Planners have spent many hours on the site examining the way it is used.



At the second Community Meeting the park planners will come back with more ideas and vignettes, at the third meeting they will be even more refined, and by the fourth we hope to come to consensus

\$100,000 has been allocated for restoration of the house, items identified in the historic structure report, one of which will be tuck pointing the chimneys

\$300,000 has been allocated to restore the fence in 2110.

We hope to submit a grant to IDNR and for a national grant.

Once improvements are identified they will typically be phased in over a number of years.

Presentation

Mr. John Mac Manus of the Altamanu Inc. facilitated the meeting and Josephine Bellalta and Julie Smith of Altamanu Inc. took notes and also took part in the meeting.

John gives some historical background for the park and explains why, in Oak Park especially, the history of a site is important.

Do we go back and take all the things we like and reconstruct them, or do we take what we like and move it forward and create a new plan. To make that decision we need to know the history of this site and Laura Thompson the Executive Director of the Pleasant Home Foundation is here to help us.

John introduces Laura Mercier Thompson, Executive Director of the Pleasant Home Foundation. Ms Thompson gives an abbreviated history of the house, site and Foundation. This history can be found in detail on the Pleasant Home Foundations website:

<http://www.oprf.com/phf/tour.html>

John makes a PowerPoint presentation that examines the location of green space in the area, the present conditions of the park and a comparison with the historic photos of the site. Using historic photographs he takes the meeting around the site. See PowerPoint of Community Meeting #1.

The site was originally laid out in an Italianate style with terraces, changes in level, large lawns and trees planted in formal rows. Only two trees remain from the original planting palette. There was a formal walk leading to a fountain south of the house. Further south tall evergreens framed a circular flower bed. At the end of the walk there was a summer house on a raised level. Decorative urns demarcated movement from one space to the next.



None of the main paths or plantings today align with the original layout

There has been a lot of talk about the proposed Pavilion that might be added to the house by the Foundation; however, I would like to leave that until later in the meeting so that we can cover other topics first.

John then asks the attendees a series of questions. Should the park remain passive?

Active versus Passive, Playgrounds and Security

Many state that the park should remain passive but a minority believes that some play facilities for children should be provided.

There are a lot of other people who live here and there are not that many green spaces available and I don't see why one small portion couldn't be given to people who have families.

I like the passive park but there should be some area for families.

I think it's a very large space I don't think a small playground would be an issue. There isn't something within walking distance. You can still preserve a lot of green space but we have a limited amount of park in the neighborhood.

The playground would be for kids 2-10.

I wouldn't mind if they could have soccer fields, but the small corner towards Pleasant would be nice.

The facts are that the neighborhood is changing and people are coming with families and there should be some sort of 2-10 year old place for kids to play.

We live in the four flat there on Pleasant Place (SW corner). Neither one of us would object to something bigger than a tot lot nor would we object to it being near our 4 flat. In matter of fact we would like to have some small kids around, it would be pleasant.



2 blocks down the street here is an existing tot lot, and I know that is a great distance to walk (sarcasm). Why don't you use that?

It is not adequate for kids over 3 years old.

That lot is really small and hasn't been redone even though I think it would be easy to redo it.

The Park District has many parks under reconstruction right now I am sure they will get to it in time.

You are not supposed to go there after 3 years old.

I think that having a play ground for children 3-10 is a great idea. My concern is that the park is so used by people who have dogs and dogs and kids do not really mix. Sometimes that can cause conflicts and I wouldn't want to have dogs not having a place to run. I think it's great to have a place where children can play. In this park there has not always been very good policing at night. Until the beginning of the summer whenever the weather was warmer than 20 degrees we would have kids on their cell phones yelling, drinking, etc. I don't think the gang related activity is something you can take lightly.

I live on the North Side of Mills Park Tower and I love the park. In the summer there's a fair amount of noise in the afternoons, sometimes in the mid-evening, from children and others. At times it gets a little annoying, but I can live with that. I would prefer to keep it pretty much as is and let children play as they do but without playground equipment. Bring a ball throw a ball around; maybe have more places to sit down where parents can watch them play.

I also thought this was a nice opportunity to work in "natural" playgrounds.

You mean "Last Child in the Woods"? This might be a nice opportunity to have a concept like that. The idea is that we are the last generation to have a link with nature and we need to assist kids in discovering nature.

I'm a huge fan of that book; I have 2 little boys who are 7 & 10. I loved the fact this park was different, was open and they could run and play without the distraction of a Tot Lot.



The zoo has done a wonderful job in their animal play area (Brookfield). They use natural objects and my children absolutely love it.

Reality check - we want to do that. America is the most litigious country in the world. We tried to do this in Taylor but the Park District can't take the full liability for a play area that is designed in a natural format. But the manufacturers who build the equipment and do take liability charge a fortune for non standard components. The cheapest piece of equipment we could get for that was over \$30,000.

The arboretum also has a nice natural play area, pond with rocks. My child will spend hours building a dam.

Security and the Homeless

I just want to say that the site is so large and there is so much youth activity and other activity that it might be good to put a couple call boxes in different areas. I can't really walk my dog thru here at night without making sure I have my phone out.

It is very dark at night. We need more lights. Visibility is one of the issues as well (should you take out a fence).

The more a park is used the less trouble you have.

They have only recently turned the lights back on again

How about tables as well as benches with lights over the tables? Put them in SW corner near Marion.

I think reintroducing nature to children is a wonderful idea. You mentioned areas that have that for instance the zoo, etc. You have to realize those places are very individualized places which attract people during the day and aren't in them at night. Once this park gets dark out, whatever elements you add to the park, you invite vandalism you invite gangs and all kinds of problems here. As we mentioned in that last focus meeting, whoever took that bench out of that building really improved the park. I took photographs of people doing drugs, having sex, drinking, throwing bottles on our property; I called the police who arrive an hour later or never



at all. If you have a playground area or any other benches please do not encroach on any of the residential area. Put it in the center of the park.

Ever since last Wednesday night they (the Park District) have been turning more lights on. The bad side is those lights are shining in our departments and it is very discouraging. I have gotten many complaints.

Our grounds have subtle lighting, ground lighting specially designed.

Rather than being completely negative about every suggestion what proposals would you suggest to the Park District?

I would prefer not to have a tot lot or any kind of implements for children; I'd like to see programs here where you have nature walks where you are showing children nature. Teach them about different kinds of birds. Forget benches, they bring all kinds of nefarious activity.

The problems with drinking and the homeless won't be alleviated by taking out benches.

How about picnic benches and tables with extra lighting over them or near areas where police cars would drive along there.

Or up by where that person's driveway is.

I live in Mills Park directly outside where the bench was. There was rarely a morning when there was not a homeless person sleeping on that bench. I came from the Detroit area and was shocked what I saw here in Oak Park. Any decision that is made, the people around the park have to live with that. We need to get the police department to patrol this.

There are seats along the East side, does the same thing happen?

I live across the street from this bench on the East, and I can tell you there are people on that bench day and night, early morning etc. There is always a homeless man across the street.

From my vantage point I can't see what is going on there. I can tell you that stuff happens along Home Ave I became a vigilante calling the police. Police showed up within 5 minutes or 15, it was never an hour.



Is there any reason you think this happens in this park in particular?

This park is near the El.

We have a phenomenal number of birds around here. I'm a dog owner, I have a big dog. I've really been discouraged from using this park, when we walk through with our dogs there is a lot less of this stuff going on. The dogs are good for the park.

This is going to be unpopular; I have a different view of this homeless issue. I'm on the north side of Mills Park. I don't like equating the homeless with the gang bangers. I've met many of those people who are passive and pleasant and the Pads program gets pulled in the summer and they have nowhere to go. I've taken food to some and made friends with them, I understand that this is a very minority opinion in this group and where I live. If people are concerned about the drug dealers, we might consider putting hour limits on the park and say it can only be used sun rise to sundown. Maybe lock the park. If we did that we might need to discuss where homeless people can go.

My husband has gone out numerous times and asked people both teenagers and the homeless nicely to please quiet down. Nobody ever listens to him. That being said, I think that we lived across from that bench and almost daily someone was sleeping etc.

My concern is that we are taking away from our quality of life. The Village of Oak Park needs to find new solutions to these issues. I don't like holding back good things.

In addition tonight is the first meeting, there are other people in this neighborhood who like to use this park and have a right to use this park.

I live by the Y and I am dealing with those issues myself. Having said that, I think to keep from having a storm of people later come in and say hey maybe we all ought to think about each other even more. But a flyer was put on my friends stoop yesterday. I don't understand why we couldn't come up with something to enjoy, lock it at night or make it such a great park I want to be in it in the evening and we take the park back as ours.

Bryan Park in New York was full of homeless and the people took it back.



These problems are in all of these parks, they are occurring all over.

I suggest at the next meeting we invite someone from the police department.

We did for tonight.

Maybe you can invite them a little more assertively.

Gary says, what works is when people take part, take action and the more people come into the park the more people use the park, its' the number one thing to satisfy the situation.

In Barrie Park we had one person in the neighborhood say they wanted to be part of the solution, and involved the youth intervention in the community as well. The neighborhood coming together also works.

There was heroin and cocaine smoked and used in Ridgeland Commons, stories were done on it, a suggestion was made to have motion and heat sensors that would turn a light on when someone was in the park. That way if someone was in the park, and the police drove by, they would have their attention drawn to the light. Motion and temperature will not be set off by a squirrel, cat or bird.

I would hate not to see any benches because to enjoy a park is to sit and listen to the birds and soak up nature.

We don't have enough shelters for the homeless and PADS is not operative in the summer months. I tend to agree that it will be a bigger problem when the Y closes and there will be 120 people with no place to go. We need more housing for the homeless.

I also brought up the PADS program at the Focus Meeting, rather than taking money and spending it on the park, I'd like to see that program opened year round. Maybe they can be extended to youth groups. Etc.

Who runs the PADS program?



We are volunteers for the PADS program and it is run entirely by volunteers who are grateful for a little time off in the summer. Funding comes from private donations, churches, state. Shelters are almost always in churches. They rotate around from area to area.

The issue is complex; they probably won't get a grant from the state IDNR to get funding for the PADS program.

We have issues of unruly poorly supervised local youth. We found this at Barrie Park, I hear this term Gang Banger used continuously. We do not have that problem here in Oak Park, we do have unruly youth. The next meeting I will work to have youth interventions come to help you understand this further.

We will have a rep from the police department and rep from Pads so we can spend a little time on this discussion.

Much of this is a spillover from River Forest, the Whole foods parking lot is a well known drug drop off also in the Jewel parking lot in River Forest.

Just an observation we are talking about a park where we can all benefit from. We are overlaying social issues of the urban society. We have been a model of diversity and with tolerance for many peoples' diverse opinions. If we are afraid of what our community really is we lose out. I respect what everyone is saying. These issues affect any place in an urban setting. My back yard is along Home Ave. When we first moved in people would sleep by the dark area. I do see large groups of unruly kids gathering here.

This summer has been delightful since the benches are gone.

I think that many times the way the conversation was going, that that (gang banging) would be the dominate activity at times.

It obviously isn't so.



Design Template

The design vocabulary should reflect the history of the area in the lights and benches.

How about natural gardens? What would Jens Jensen do with this area?

We also have Forest Preserve HQ a couple blocks from here.

Let's bring some of the native plants here.

John informs the audience that Jens Jensen did a plan for the site, but it did not show his usual design characteristics, Farson seems to have had a huge influence on the design and it was never installed.

This park was designed by Maher and plants installed by a local nursery. Do we decide to blow off that history and do what Jensen would have done?

I grew up playing here with my 3 brothers from 1943 on. I remember what it looked like in 1945. I've been showing people what everything was and what it has become. I remember the circle and asking my mother do the horses come by here, is it a race track? It was great to grow up here and be an American. However it's not a perfect world anymore. I think it should be a passive park. I would like to go back to the neoclassical design, yes. I remember the terraces. Do we want to expand the historic plan throughout the site?

There is a discussion about the historic template and people are torn about how much could be or should be restored. Restore the Home Ave. side and leave as much as possible natural.

It seems as though most of us like the idea of the formal park Maher designed towards Home Avenue. Could you also go through the historical slides, and view how they did their seating area.



Mills Tower

I understand there has been some focus group work at Mills Tower. I'm curious what the seniors would like to see here. I think ADA accessible walking paths. Cushioned exercise surfaces of some kind? Do you have information from those residents?

Yes, initially we thought they would want a sitting place outside, but they didn't want it anymore unless they could enclose it with a fence, didn't want people in the evening coming through, worried about their security.

Mills Tower residents were concerned about unfinished pathways and low branches on trees. We did ask if they would like to have circuit path in the park and the response was no, keep it as green as possible. A few people had issues with access, it is very difficult to traverse through the park as the path ends and there are steps to the NE.

But overall not a lot of change, they talked about wanting to see maybe the fountain reinstalled with seating around it.

Some of the seniors wanted somewhere for the kids to play.

Lighting

Would you include on the questionnaire something about lighting, I'm concerned that people think that well lit means very brightly lit. I consider that to be light pollution like on Marion Street. I can see a lot of relatively moderate light.

It depends on your light source, screening, damping etc.

I want to speak about the aspect of nature. Right now it is a very open park, you have trees etc. I love the fact that people walk their dogs in the park, it deters malicious activity. You have to be careful of creating all the lighting at night. If you have this park so lit up it will hurt nature.

If you look out of the window into the park tonight, you can really see what is under that light. You can see what is under those lamps (the small bollards) allow for a perfect level of light.



Fountain

I would love to see the fountain and benches. I would hate to see the park locked, people use those thoroughfares in the evening we walk our dog there. I think actually pleasant home would benefit from the fountain too; a lot of weddings are here, a place for pictures, a getaway during a wedding reception.

Lock the Park? Leave the Park as it is

I use this park only in the daytime and this is where I recreate, I walk throughout the park. If it's going to become filled up now with structures cement and fountains, it seems to me the charm is gone. The very things that I'm lured by, getting into a bit of nature, would be gone. It's near to my doorstep, that might sound selfish, but that would be my pick.

I just wanted to say I agree with you very much. I'd like to leave it as is and use that money for something else in Oak Park. I'm not as worried about the gangs, but really don't want to lock the park.

How are these meetings advertised?

The Park District places flyers and posters in all their facilities, they send out emails and newsletters, put information on their marquee, send the information to the press and boyscouts deliver fliers. The boyscouts waited to the weekend to do it, and of course it rained and rained. We'll see if they can deliver them a week and a half before hand. October 8th is the next meeting.

Paths, Access and Signage

Signage is needed for Pleasant Home Foundation, people don't like going under the EL.



The East side doesn't have stroller or wheelchair accessibility on that entire side. I would like to see that changed.

Concrete ADA pathways or cushiony pathways; concrete is not necessarily good for your joints. Ground up tire or cork pathways.

They are very expensive

Wood Chippings?

OK but they wouldn't be ploughed in winter

Should we penetrate the historic fence? Then you'd have a link (path) running right across the park. The group is undecided.

The Arboretum has used permeable paving; I thought that might be a possibility.

How many trees will we cut down? I am afraid you will cut trees down to make paths. Let's be clear we will not be cutting down trees to make paths.

Desire lines are created because they link entrance to entrance directly. If we are going to look at the possibility of creating a new path system we might look at the location of the entrances. If they change the paths will change.

Could we have an entry on the SE corner where there is chain link fence and it's not historic, we could enter there.

It seems natural me to have one formal entrance along Home Avenue with the possibility of cutting through the historic fence (by the) being in harmony with the fountain or flower bed.

Also it seems practical to have it over on Marion.

Right now there is a vehicular gate opening on Marion; maybe not there than if that one is used already.



Recap of some of the issues at this point in the meeting:

2 People are in favor of locking the park, most were not.
Some people are interested in a children's natural area in the SW of the park
Most are in favor of restoring the fountain and some are in favor of adding seating around the fountain
Natural flower gardens are very popular
Some people would volunteer to keep the gardens
Many people would like to see other pathways added around the park. A few object to concrete paths. Some would like pavers, others rubber. Concrete is used because it is durable, can be plowed and pavers are more expensive. Chicago is testing out sidewalks made out of recycled rubber that looks like a sidewalk. Altamanu is to come back with various designs that will be presented.

Pavilion

A discussion was held about the proposal to add a structure to the rear (west) of Pleasant Home for use for events. This structure would be the location for events and conferences and therefore wear and tear on the house would be reduced. This would allow the house to be more museum-like.

A Board member of the Pleasant Home Foundation made a presentation:

I walked by Pleasant home many times thinking it was a private house. Then I was approached to join the board and have been involved for over a year. There are several neighbors as well as preservationists on the board. There has been an issue with events at Pleasant Home as the house is used for events and this has a bad effect on the house. . Also the temporary tent structures that are erected take time and money. Now the idea of a semi permanent structure has been raised. A lot of this centers on financial interests. Even though the board does look for donations and grants, events open the house up to the community and enable it to remain open. It is going to be very important for the house and Foundation. - Pros and cons - I live on the block, I hear events that take place at night or on weekends, my driveway gets blocked. They don't particularly bother me; I am in favor of having the structure to keep the home from falling apart. There is wear and tear on the home from the way events are held. For me it's a



tradeoff, I want the house to remain here and it is a treasure for the community. I understand the realism for the foundation. I suffer a lot of the same kinds of things that some neighbors complain about but for me the trade off of having the house here is far greater.

Comments:

How much does the foundation need to keep this house in order?

In year 2002 we created a report looking at 3 phases to restore the home. In 2002 the bottom line on that restoration was about 5 million dollars. Since 1990 nearly 1 million has been spent on the home due to support of the Park District and local grants. We have been operating on a budget of less than \$100,000, paying staff, guiding tours, securing grant funding, and overseeing repairs. Rental events bring 1/3- to 1/2 of that income. The remainder is grant etc.

There are lots of times when I walk by weddings etc and they are just beautiful. They are inside the home, out in the front, they are just wonderful. There is also the fact that people block driveways, cars, etc. There is banging etc and they are loud. I don't think this is a quality of life I want or people surrounding this house. The community will change within five years; the question is it worth it?

In my mind doing this pavilion takes away the passive aspect of the park which was the first thing I believe was said at the meeting. That being said from a financial point of view, if there was a facility there would need to be guidelines on how it would be run and used. Enforce these policies.

Can you actually fill the pavilion? I was under the impression this was underused.

Our goal first and foremost in introducing the idea of the pavilion to remove the wear and tear from the house and leave it as a National Historic Landmark.

The home is used but not every weekend. We are rented from September to the end of December picking up again around March until about the end of May middle of June. Rarely July and August as there is no air conditioning. Looking over our rental schedule, they ebb and flow. A large wedding here is about 150 people. Many are typically ceremonies only, a lot of anniversary birthday events. Major events where a temporary tent has been erected have taken place only in recent years. 4 times a year so they can have a dance tent.

(A women in the audience disagrees with the number)



Are you going to get a return on your investment?

We may be able to bring other types of programs in, kids in for nature walks, camps classes etc.

There was a wedding here 2 weekends ago, it was so loud I couldn't hear a conversation on the phone. I was shocked the city (Village) of Oak Park would allow it.

One of the reasons people want to have an event here is to be in a historic home, why would they want to be in a pavilion? We can use the pavilion but still have the house to walkthrough and to use the facilities.

It seems the pavilion could cut down on the noise? Yes it could be insulated in some way I love the sound of the music and I live on the park. I imagine a tent lets out more sound than the pavilion. Yes.

We have talked with our staff about having an open community meeting explaining why we do rental events and how we live within the ordinances of the Village. If you are interested in doing something like that we will sit and talk about those issues. We felt it was important to bring it to the forefront of the planning process. Talking about music, time, drunk people etc, we can talk about that in a separate meeting.

I am not sure we can, the pavilion is a major issue and is already on the table.

Gary closes the meeting. Thank you for coming, for our next meeting we will bring back some of the ideas you have brought up on a plan; there will be more vignettes than actual plans. There is a questionnaire on the website you can fill out and provide input about the plan. If for some reason you don't have a computer we can mail that to you.

We have members of the Park Board here who have been listening to all your comments; the ultimate decision rests with the Park Board.

End of Minutes