



MEETING SYNOPSIS

May 19, 2021

The following is a summary of the eighth meeting of the Elevate Advisory Council Parks and Recreation subcommittee. The attendance sheet and guest speaker materials are attached to this summary. The agenda and city materials can be found on the Elevate Tuscaloosa website under Advisory Council > Meetings. This meeting was held in City Council chambers.

Welcome

Brendan Moore (City of Tuscaloosa) welcomed everyone to the meeting and acknowledged Councilor Matthew Wilson (District 1) attending via Zoom.

Parks Survey Update

Katy Beth Jackson (City of Tuscaloosa) provided an update on the parks and recreation community survey. The survey was open to the public from January 5, 2021 to March 5, 2021. Nearly 3,000 people responded, providing thousands of open-ended comments. The responses are being analyzed and a summary report will be developed. The University of Alabama Institute for Social Science Research will present the report to the Parks and Recreation subcommittee at a future meeting.

PARA Presentation

Mayor Walt Maddox (City of Tuscaloosa) presented a proposed action plan to achieve a true metro park system as a first step toward building a community partnership for Tuscaloosa County Parks and Recreation Authority (PARA). A copy of the presentation is on the website on the Meetings page (click View Materials next to this meeting). This presentation will also be made to PARA's board, Tuscaloosa County, and the City Council of Northport.

Mayor Maddox explained that, in order to be a competitive place to live and work, we need a vibrant parks system. The current structure and funding model of PARA does not accomplish this goal or meet all the various needs of its three funding governments (City of Tuscaloosa, City of Northport, and Tuscaloosa County). Mayor Maddox's proposal was presented to the group as a conversation starter, or one idea. He noted that his presentation is not a best and final offer from the City of Tuscaloosa but that immediate action is necessary from Tuscaloosa's perspective and he welcomes other ideas and discussion. Specific details of the proposal can be found in the presentation.



For perspective, Mayor Maddox noted that if PARA were a city department, the level of funding the city provides would make it the fourth largest department. He also noted that the city's spending on parks shown in the presentation slides does not include any spending on the Tuscaloosa Amphitheater, the Tuscaloosa Riverwalk, the River Market, independent city parks (such as Shelby Park), the three lakes, or boat landings. If these costs were factored in, Tuscaloosa's spending per citizen would increase significantly.

One problem with today's park system is that the City of Tuscaloosa does not know or understand exactly what our PARA funding pays for, or if it is adequate to meet the needs and goals we want to achieve. Another challenge is that PARA should be locating new parks and rec facilities based upon customer needs, with a goal of reducing or eliminating redundancies in the system. New facilities are expensive to operate and maintain, which strains the total funding PARA receives if one or more of the governments does not increase funding when the new facility opens.

Our city's community centers currently under perform in terms of the number of members who pay to use them, especially when compared to the Faucett Brothers and Miller Centers located in Tuscaloosa County. According to PARA's 2021 budget reports submitted to the city, Tuscaloosa's five centers together lose over \$1 million each year (revenues generated, minus expenses to operate). By comparison, the county's three facilities are near breaking even. The programming and missions of each of the activity centers varies. A trend that needs to be closely monitored for all of PARA's activity centers is membership numbers as we move further into recovery from the pandemic. Currently, memberships are down 40% from pre-pandemic numbers and it remains uncertain if they will rebound.

The Mayor recommended implementing a system where performance measures for each park or facility in our portfolio are provided and analyzed on a quarterly basis. He also stated that if, by the time of the next state legislative session, there is no movement from others in the metro parks system to make significant changes in the key areas outlined in his proposal, that the City of Tuscaloosa will begin moving in an independent direction. This would require the city to pay about \$2 million in start-up funding and about \$1.5 million in annual funding each year. If this occurs, the city would examine how to reduce costs to operate our five activity centers.

State Representative Chris England (Advisory Council co-chair) asked about the legal process for updating the board structure of PARA, as proposed. Mayor Maddox responded that he understands the restructuring would need to be approved by the legislature of the State of Alabama.

Steven Rumsey (subcommittee member) noted that one challenge with the PARA model today is that the average citizen does not understand the intricacies and complexities of



how PARA is organized, funded, operated, and maintained, or how parks and recreation decisions are made in Tuscaloosa County. Residents know of PARA as a community parks organization but most do not understand much more than that. Mr. Rumsey also believes that we need to closely examine our facilities and figure out how to maximize their functionality, purpose, and effectiveness. He continued by noting that it seems the community *expects* Northport not to contribute to various jointly funded community organizations, and that needs to change (PARA and the library were cited as examples). Mayor Maddox responded that a metro parks system is unsustainable without all governments in the metro area funding it adequately. He also believes the most cost effective option for Northport is to participate in the metro model, although he noted that Northport is free to operate and fund an independent city park system for their citizens.

Lesley Bruinton (subcommittee member) is supportive of finding a better solution for Tuscaloosa's parks system. She asked if the city is able to remove any parks and rec facilities in order to reduce costs. With the exception of Ol' Colony Golf Course, we can. She noted that she often hears PARA director Mr. Minor request more funding, particularly from the City of Tuscaloosa. She stated that she is not aware of an equally persistent effort to request more funding from the other funding partners. She questioned what benefit City of Tuscaloosa residents would receive in return for providing more funding. Mrs. Bruinton also questioned why the city activity centers appear to be in worse condition than those in the county.

Gary Minor (subcommittee member) stated that he hopes this call to action will lead to improvements in the future. He noted that PARA also has memberships for people through their insurance policies and those membership figures were not included in the data provided to the Mayor for this presentation. It also does not include attendance by people at fitness programs and in athletic leagues and programs. PARA's board voted about five years ago not to approve new facilities without negotiating to receive funding to operate the facility. Mr. Minor stated that the funding PARA receives is not adequate. He agreed that the activity centers need funds reinvested in them, or else some of them might need to close. Tripp Powell (subcommittee member) also noted that additional governmental funding could allow PARA to lower the fees it charges to members and users.

Rep. England noted that an important benefit of continuing with a metro parks system model is that it keeps costs lower, which allows the system's resources and programs to be made available to all residents, regardless of their ability to pay. A system where every government is self-seeking will lead to higher costs and the need to charge higher fees, which many residents cannot afford to pay.



GAF Presentation

Mr. Moore introduced Jeff Terry with GAF Materials Corp. GAF is a national company in the roof materials manufacturing industry with a facility located in West Tuscaloosa. A copy of GAF's presentation is attached behind this synopsis. GAF approached the city just before the pandemic began to discuss a public-private partnership opportunity for the Western Riverwalk. Andy Hilton, Katrina Baker, and Parrish Bowlin also joined from GAF. Mr. Hilton described other community projects that GAF has completed or has underway now. In Tuscaloosa, GAF wants to engage the local community to help drive the type and characteristics of the project that could be done here in a co-creative process. A potential location they have in mind for the project is at the Oliver Lock and Dam park, which will serve as the western end of the Riverwalk extension. Once a project is identified through the co-creative process mentioned above, GAF intends to provide the necessary resources to design and construct it.

Next Steps

Mayor Maddox informed the subcommittee that he wants to continue engaging them in the PARA discussion and he asked them to continue engaging residents of the community about this important topic. Any solution must require accountability and a successful metro model must embrace the shared responsibility of operating a consolidated parks system.

The subcommittee will continue to be involved and/or updated as the GAF project takes shape and the community engagement process becomes defined.

The next parks and recreation subcommittee meeting will be scheduled later. The full Advisory Council meets on June 17 at 11 AM at the Tuscaloosa River Market.