

Minutes of the Parks & Recreation Committee Meeting September 27, 2023

Attendees

Committee:

Present: Bob Bender, Margaret Della, David Gellman, Rob Jacklosky, Debra Travis (Chair)

Absent: Robert Fanuzzi, Rashida Hilliard, Ramdat Singh

Other Board:

Julie Reyes (Board Chair), Josh Land

City Agencies and Invited Guests:

Joe Magneri (District Parks Manager, DPR), Alexander Han (Chief of Concessions, DPR), Melissa Goldberg (Director of Compliance, DPR), Lindsay Schott (Project Manager, DPR), Stephanie Ehrlich (Van Cortlandt Park Administrator), Scott Tartar (Riverdale Stables)

The meeting commenced at 7:04pm

1. Welcome and Introduction of Committee Members and Guests

2. Approval of the June 28, 2023 Minutes

The committee meeting minutes of June 28, 2023 were approved unanimously

3. Chair's Report

Bailey Playground Restroom Repairs – the roof of the Bailey Playground restroom is being replaced. The restroom will be closed for approximately one month once construction begins.

Seton Park Adult Fitness Station and Skate Park Capital Improvement – construction on this project has begun. The area including the restroom will be closed for approximately 12-24 months.

4. Discussion of Upcoming Request for Proposals for Riverdale Stables with Guests Scott Tarter from Riverdale Stables and Melissa Goldberg, Lindsay Schott and Alexander Han from NYC Parks Concession Unit

Mr. Tartar discussed with the committee the history of Riverdale Stables in Van Cortlandt Park, his operations and their programming. They currently have 55 horses of which they use 36 for classes they offer in a jumping/hunting style of horsemanship for elementary and high school student and adults. Approximately 350 – 400 riders takes lessons with them each year, although their summer camp had low participation with just 8 riders. Approximately 40 kids participate in the Interscholastic Riding Program/Ride IEA. They also board 12 horses privately for residents of Manhattan, Yonkers, Brooklyn and The Bronx. Prior to the pandemic, Riverdale Stables partnered with Flying Manes Therapeutic Riding who provided therapeutic riding services for youth. This non-profit dissolved during the pandemic. Riverdale Stables also operates Twin Lakes Farm North and South and the focus of all three stables is riding education for tournaments, particularly the Interscholastic Riding Program RideIEA, and boarding. Riverdale Stables does not offer ongoing pony rides or birthday parties, however, it refers people who are interested in this to City Island Stables in Pelham Bay Park. They do offer tours for schools.

Challenges Riverdale Stables have faced include dogs and ATV's on the trails and the rising cost of insurance eliminating their ability to allow students to ride on the trails in Van Cortlandt Park. Their operating costs have increased 35% in the last five years primarily due to the rising cost of diesel fuel for hay deliveries and manure disposal.

Riverdale Stables concession contract will expire in August of 2024. The focus for the committee was to provide comments to the Parks Concession Unit as they prepare the Request for Proposals for stables for an 18 year concession agreement which would begin upon the expiration of the current agreement. Concessions expects with the longer term of the concession agreement more capital improvements over time. They hope to release the RFP this fall.

Feedback and Comments the Committee Provided to Parks:

1. **Outreach** – Riverdale Stables has free pony rides on Mother's Day, for example, however, no one on the committee had ever heard this. They currently rely primarily on "mom word of mouth" which consists of person to person referrals within an existing social network. The committee noted that this can create racial and social silo's inadvertently and recommended that they use social media such as Facebook or Instagram to make more people aware of their activities. The Concessions Unit requested a list of community organizations and social channels that park concessions could use to promote their activities which the committee chair agreed to provide. The committee also asked the Concession Unit to expand its outreach for the applicants for the RFP since the competitiveness of the program is the only way to encourage entities submitting proposals to submit competitive proposals. They were encouraged to consider alternate uses like animal sanctuaries in addition to riding stables as long as the focus of the organization was on community engagement and interaction with animals and not a private farm.
2. **Affordability** – While the weekly prices are within norms of what many parents pay for lessons, they are still out of the range of what is affordable for the majority of the community. As examples the \$825/week cost of camp and the \$116/week minimum for participation in the Interscholastic Riding Program were given. The committee discussed with the Concessions Unit considering preference to non-profits that could use grants to offset costs and to encourage the next concessionaire to provide scholarships, low cost pony rides or free access to programming once a month to allow people across the district access to experience horses.
3. **Access** – In addition to affordability, the committee encouraged the Concession Unit to look for operators that were committed to programming and activities that could be of broad interest and relevant to as many people as possible across the district. Many residents in Kingsbridge, Marble Hill and Kingsbridge Heights are unaware that we have a stable and do not have access to their offerings.

The committee also continues to prefer that money raised by concessions in Van Cortlandt Park stay in Van Cortlandt Park in a model like that of Central Park and Prospect Park. The concessions unit stated that it was a requirement of the city charter that money raised through concessions goes to the New York City General Fund.

Jay Weiner with The Gentle Barn, an animal sanctuary, expressed interest in applying and they are looking forward to putting forward a proposal that they think will be exciting.

5. Update and Discussion of Response to Proposal for Exclusive Use of 19.5 Acres of Van Cortlandt Park Parade Ground for 2024 T20 Cricket World Cup

The International Cricket Committee has notified Community Board 8 that Van Cortlandt Park is no longer under consideration for the 2024 T20 Men's World Cup. The committee agreed to encourage the ICC to partner with Van Cortlandt Park Alliance to sponsor free, public cricket camps and tournaments and to improve the existing cricket facilities in Van Cortlandt Park to broaden the appeal of the sport.

6. Old Business

Chair requested an update on the construction of the Mosholu Golf Course Driving Range and golf course restoration. Concessions stated that First Tee still had some additional capital dollars they were required to spend and they were in discussions about the placement of the first tee.

7. New Business

Vice Chair - Bob Bender has agreed to be the Vice Chair of the Parks Committee. Chair raised the suggestion of each member of the committee volunteering to do the minutes for one meeting. The topic was tabled until the next meeting.

Paul's Playground – Joe Magneri with Parks Operations stated that sand boxes are being phased out in parks due to hygiene concerns. They are often used by animals as litter boxes. New guidelines are coming from Parks for existing sand boxes. Friends of Spuyten Duyvil has merged with Stewards of Henry Hudson Park and will be working with the Parks Department to manage the sand box in Paul's Playground with their volunteers and local parents. It is one of the last remaining sand boxes in the city.

Van Cortlandt Stadium – a suggestion was made to add lights to the Van Cortlandt Stadium and to the Parade Ground. Chair tabled discussion until we have our FY26 committee budget priorities meeting in January to add it to the list then. It was also noted that the track in the stadium is in need of repair. Stephanie Ehrlich confirmed that capital money has been allocated to resurface the track and replace the turf. A study of the condition of the stadium itself and cost to restore it is currently funded and in early stages.

Manhattan College Cross Country Invitational – NYPD has created a traffic enforcement plan for this cross country tournament that is held in Van Cortlandt Park. In the past, bus traffic and double parked cars have caused traffic backups on Broadway.

Reimagine the Cross Bronx – Reimagine the Cross Bronx is conducting a survey of anyone who works or lives near or uses the Cross Bronx Expressway. All are welcome to take the survey. Go to crossbronx.info and select the blue button "Take Our Survey"

The meeting adjourned at 9:18pm

Minutes submitted by Deb Travis

Recording Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1OZp00Bzng>