

GRASSROOTS PARK GROUP REQUESTS RESCISSION OF BYLAWS CHANGES PERTAINING TO RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

They came from Hambden and Troy, Chester and Munson, and Chardon, Parkman, Bainbridge, South Russell and Claridon. They were bird lovers, hikers, fishermen, plant biologists, photography buffs, horseback riders and conservationists, all united for a common cause: To protect the county park system.

And they filled the Donald W. Meyer Center meeting room Monday morning to voice their displeasure with the Geauga Park District Board of Commissioners and to request the board rescind the bylaws it changed a month ago pertaining to recreational activities in the parks.

“We are just deeply concerned that after six months of experience wholesale changes are being made. We don’t think that you have given yourselves the opportunity to get the proper background to take some of these actions,” Ed Buckles, of Troy Township, told the park commissioners, two of whom — Lou Mucci and Mary Ruth Shumway — have been on the job for about six months and one of whom — Brian Johnston — roughly six weeks.

And rescission of the bylaws needs to include “that insane list of activities that are clearly not recreational,” he added. “And the ones that are recreational need to be and are better handled at local underutilized township and school districts.”

He noted the bylaw changes were introduced in June and adopted at the July board meeting.

“There needs to be a longer time frame, particularly when you are looking at something as basic as the changing of the goals of the park system,” Buckles said.

“We think activities need to be compatible with preservation of the parks (and) with other activities going on in the parks,” he said. “You cannot have ATV riding compatible with horseback riding.”

Buckles and the other speakers all took exception to the park commissioners’ recent expansion of permitted recreational activities in the parks to include ATVs, dirt bikes, field hockey, firearms range, gas and oil drilling, hockey, lacrosse, mountain biking, rugby, skateboarding, skate parks and sporting clays. Many of the speakers were members of a grassroots group that met Saturday morning in Frohring Meadows park in Bainbridge Township to express concerns about the park district, including environmental issues, board process and transparency issues, use of park facilities and legal issues.

“This county is the headwaters for three major rivers running into Lake Erie. It is known for the quality of its drinking water and all those things flow through the park system and need to be protected,” Ed said. He asked park commissioners how logging and oil and gas drilling are “recreational activities,” as listed in the revised bylaws.

Residents also are concerned about expenses related to the expansion of activities, such as snowmobiling and gun ranges.

“What are you going to do about enforcement and supervision?” Buckles asked. “And many of these activities are already covered by local township parks and are not being used.”

Buckles also told the commissioners the fastest growing outdoor activity in the United States is birding. He said close to 100,000 people — from 30 states and five foreign countries — visited Ottawa County over a 10-day period earlier this year for birding.

“Do you know how much money that brought in?” asked Buckles. “And you have prime birding spots in this area.”

Those areas include The Rookery and Orchard Hills Park.

Buckles said group members keep asking why is the board acting now after just six months. "What's the push? What's the drive? What is doing this?"

And, the answers they are being given are not reflected in the minutes of park board meetings, he added.

"There is too much activity going on outside the public view," he said, including communication between park commissioners and members of the grassroots group. "You shouldn't be having conversations with people outside of a public forum, where we have an opportunity to address the issues and all sides be heard in that great marketplace of ideas."

Shumway told those gathered Monday that ATVs were included in permissible recreational activities so park rangers or other rescue personnel could use them in cases of emergency without violating zoning issues.

"Are the park rangers doing this recreationally or is this part of their job in trying to help someone?" asked one resident.

"That is a specious argument," Buckles said. "Then why is it under activities? Why isn't it under emergency services?"

As for the gun range, Shumway said it is a range the Boy Scouts once used at Chickamani Park in Parkman Township.

"And it's been closed down and they had to do lead remediation at a high cost," Buckles responded.

"That's why we need public meetings so these facts can be put in front of everybody."

Mucci said a gun range has not been reopened, but rather the idea of having a range there is being discussed and analyzed with the park district ranger department.

"The second point I'd like to make ... is that list of activities was a everything-under-the-sun list of activities so that, in the future, we don't tie the hands of any board strictly for zoning," he said. "Again, I say our language and our explanation was less than ideal, and we are definitely going to revisit that."

"That is not a list of planned activities, proposed activities or anything along those lines. It strictly was in there as an attempt to put the park district in a better position should we have zoning issues in the future."

Buckles also accused park commissioners of violating their own meeting minutes by scheduling and rescheduling meetings to dates and times inconvenient to the public.

"Meetings keep getting moved; they get moved to more inconvenient times. Town hall meetings keep getting canceled. While we think that there are probably good reasons for this, it certainly leaves a bad taste in people's mouths," he said. "You need to think seriously about having set, announced hard and fast meetings that people can attend at a convenient time."

In addition, Buckles said he doubted park commissioners have "seriously looked" at their statutory obligations and strengths.

"You are responsible to the state. So, you don't have to worry about what townships think or townships want to do," he said. "But you need to take a look at that and I don't think you've looked at it closely."

In terms of legal obligations, Buckles said the park district is taking action without complying with restrictions placed on gifts, grants, property or donations.

"Have you looked at what the grantors have said?" he asked. "And even if there are no legal obligations, our folks from the horseback riding community have donated time and money, and effort to put in

horseback riding trails. You need to stop and think about them, and what their commitment to this park is, if not from a legal from a moral standpoint.”

Added Buckles, “Our fear is that you don’t understand the gem that this park is, that it represents not just Geauga County, but there are people who come here to do research, there are people who come here to go bird watching, there are people ... here because of the parks, that are here because of the atmosphere and you can destroy a lot of that atmosphere inadvertently. We want you to be very, very conscious of that.”

Mucci thanked Buckles for his presentation.

“I want you to know we are definitely interested in hearing this input and we appreciate all of you being here to show that support,” he said.

Sherry Bosworth, who worked 30 years at the park district and now is a volunteer, told the audience the park board is not responsible for complying with township zoning laws.

“They (park board) work with them as best they can, but they do not have to follow the zoning laws of the townships,” she said. “They are independent and that goes back to the Ohio Revised Code.”

She also encouraged the board to have set board meetings.

Parkman Township resident John Augustine urged park commissioners to allow more time between the posting of minutes and voting on items in the minutes.

“Regarding the bylaws, the bylaws are a constitution and I don’t know that there should be a lot of extraneous material in there,” he said, asking if he could count on one of the park commissioners to make a motion to rescind the bylaw changes.

Mucci said it would not be appropriate to totally rescind the new bylaws because the “vast bulk” of changes have to be with finance such as pre-approvals.

“I definitely give you our word that we will be addressing the issues on the activities section that is the cause of concern,” he reiterated, however.

Augustine also raised a concern regarding biking being allowed on horse trails.

“In all the meetings I’ve been to that’s never come up for discussion. Is that something recent that was done or change made?” he asked.

Shumway said there are some trails where horseback riding is prohibited. The other trails, however, are open to bikers, walkers and horses.

“The majority of our trails are multi-use; they would allow bicycles,” said John Oros, the park district’s interim director.

He conceded, however, that has not always been the case, but could not recall when the change was made.

Sandy Buckles asked Johnston how he could vote to approve the bylaw changes after serving as a park commissioner for just three weeks.

“How did you even know what the background was at that point? You weren’t even a (park commissioner)?” she said.

Johnston was interrupted when giving his answer, but later had an opportunity to address oil and gas drilling in the parks.

“There will be no oil and gas drilling in the parks,” he said.

Mucci noted, however, there are some pre-existing oil and gas wells on park district properties, for which the park district receives royalty payments.

Claridon Township resident Carol Palansky told the commissioners she had the privilege of meeting with Donald W. Meyer, the park district's first employee, hired in 1965, and his wife, Mary Lou.

"His mission and his passion was conservation, and this building is named after him," she said. "So it seems like we should give some honor to Don Meyer and his family and keep this park system as a conservation and a preservation park."

In keeping with Meyer's vision and the original park district charter, Palansky urged park commissioners to do some research and respect the wishes of the people that pass the levies and support the park system.

Craig Lanese, who lives in Munson Township's Bass Lake community, said the park district has been well supported with tax dollars and has been focused on conservation, protection and preservation.

"The fact that the people have supported it to the extent that they have says to me loud and clear that that's what they want. They don't want Lake County park district recreation, they want Geauga County conservation, preservation and protection," he said. "It seems like there has been a flurry of activity, starting with Mr. Curtain being (let go), to fix something that I don't think is truly broken."

He added, "As taxpayers, we cannot appoint you, we cannot remove you — only (Gauga County Probate Court Judge) Tim Grendell can do that — but we can vote with our wallet and the people have voted time and time again this is the kind of park district they want."

In addition to rescinding the bylaws changes, Chardon Township resident Kathy Hanratty urged the board to rescind the park district's new statement of purpose and "putting back the primary purpose of the park, which is preservation, conservation, protection."

Hambden Township resident Ken Schmidt told the park commissioners as soon as they make an all-inclusive list of permitted activities, it is not all inclusive.

"There are 93,000 some people in this county who all have different ideas on what recreation is. As soon as you make a list, it's not inclusive and it never will be, until you get input from all 93,000 some odd people," he said. "That list needs to go; it needs to be eliminated."

John Hess, a political science student at Kent State University, asked what specific steps would be taken to remove the list of "recreational" items from the bylaws.

Mucci said procedurally any changes to the bylaws must be in writing and submitted at a meeting, and not voted on until the next meeting.

"So we just can't do that, otherwise we would be violating our own bylaws," Mucci explained. "What I will do is talk to our attorney whose handling our zoning issues and we will address this language, and figure out how to make our communication more clear, that the primary mission of conservation and preservation is still there, but yet not ... weaken our position in any future zoning issues."

South Russell resident Ann Jacobson said she is more concerned about "what the list arises from, which is a revisioning of the purpose of Geauga Park District."

She noted the new bylaws do not contain the mission statement, as contained in the original bylaws dating back to the 1960s.

"I am curious as to why we no longer have a mission statement? We have a statement of purpose," she said. "The original mission statement was in line with the statute that has been referred to in this meeting, for how and why the Geauga Park District was originally conceived and executed."

Added Jacobson, "Recreation is not in the original mission statement and it is not in the statute.

Therefore, to reconfigure the entire purpose, not the entire purpose, but to add a purpose, which is

recreation, to me is somewhat in violation of what that statute originally said. And I would argue, again by looking at some of the items on the list, that recreation ... can be at odds with the mission to protect and conserve, and preserve.”