

The Richlands Recreation Commission held a special meeting via Zoom on April 23rd, 2020 at 6:00PM with the following present:

Recreation Department: Jessica Reynolds, Fred Phillips

Other Attendees:

Richlands Town Council Members: Mary Ann Strong

Recreation Commission Members Present: Jeff Hurst, Corey Whited, Joe McCall, Frances Meadows, LaRhonda Lindsey, Tony Cordle, Craig Earls

Recreation Commission Members Not Present: Joel Horn, Mike Webb

Mary Ann Strong welcomed everyone to the Richlands Recreation Commission special meeting and turned the meeting over to Jeff Hurst to open.

Special Meeting Agenda Item: Recreation Budget Reduction Request for the next Fiscal Year

Jeff Hurst: Thanks Mary Ann. We would like to open the meeting today and discuss the upcoming budget for the fiscal year. Mary Ann, can you give us some background on the request?

Mary Ann Strong: When we went are working on the budget this time of year we look at revenues and and the budget is projected to be reduced dramatically due to the COVID-19 virus impacts. The town is suffering due to closures and reduced tax revenue. We are meeting today to come up with an alternative plan to closing the Recreation Park until January. This does not include for when the Governor should allow for outdoor parks to be used. I am opposed to closing the Recreation Park, but we will need to come up with one or two solutions to propose.

Jeff Hurst: Thank you Mary Ann for the synopsis of the issue at hand. We have not been able to meet due to the virus and it is good to meet with everyone. We have had discussions around where we want to go. I have asked Fred to give us a state of the union and update us all on what is happening here at the Recreation Park.

Fred Phillips: When I started here we had 6 full time employees with other seasonal workers. We narrowed it down to 1 person through retirements, then we hired Jessica. Before the virus, we were asked to remove 4 employees. I am mowing and doing all of that work at the parks. When I first came here my main goal was to renovate the recreation gym. The town did contribute labor, and other items, but most of the money came through donations. For the most part, it is a new facility. With the proposal now, it would keep us closed. I understand it, and the money is an issue, but I would hate to see it close for that long.

Jeff Hurst: Thanks Fred that is a great background. We have one of the best gyms in the area and we are proud of it and the work you did here. As Mary Ann discussed, we need to agree on some recommendations to send to the town council on where we need to cut once the Governor has lifted the ban.

Joe McCall: If this virus was not here would we still be in the same situation with the budget?

Mary Ann Strong: Yes, I think we would Joe.

Joe McCall: Isn't the Recreation Park money factored into the tax base? If you cut, are they cutting taxes? Is one department cut and not others? If you cut from one it is hard to get it back.

Mary Ann Strong: The town has come under some financial difficulties, and I know they are cutting other departments as well. Unfortunately, the recreation budget is taking one of the largest reductions. One solution mentioned was during Monday – Friday for the Recreation Park to be open after school hours until 10PM, and normal hours on Saturday & Sunday, with closing the pool. If we are going to open the pool, the earliest would be June 10th due to the Governor's orders, which will put us behind. I struggle with closing the pool because that is one of the places a lot of people come.

Jeff Hurst: We started out well last year, but by the end it dropped off some due to weather.

Jessica Reynolds: It is one of our biggest revenue generators, we are going to lose a lot of revenue if we close.

Frances Meadows: Plus it will cost a lot to repair if we delay.

Corey Whited: I agree with Jeff. Once the Governor does lift the ban, I think adjustment of the hours is a good approach in the fall. If we don't open up will it add more expense down the road?

Jeff Hurst: Are we looking at cuts in other departments?

Mary Ann Strong: Recreation is being cut the most severely, but others are being cut from my understanding.

Frances Meadows: I am sure councilman Ratliff is behind that. He is out of the area most of the time and doesn't have a good idea of how well it does here.

Jeff Hurst: We always want what is best for the kids of the community. They need a place to come to.

Mary Ann Strong: Adrienne said she will take our recommendation and work it into staffing and try to work that part out. We tossed around some possibilities, and she is great with number crunching.

LaRhonda Lindsey: My biggest fear is if we close it, then it is hard to reopen it. I think you will see more use of the services due to everyone being kept inside for so long due to the virus.

Jessica Reynolds: I agree and Lincolnshire Park at Tazewell is planning to open the pool.

Joe McCall: Are they looking at tax increases?

Mary Ann Strong: They did look at increasing meals tax, and we had a lot of opposition that. With a lot of the restaurants closed, it would be a double hit to them with additional tax as they try to reopen. Some may not reopen.

LaRhonda Lindsey: Has anyone at the town applied for grants with the stimulus?

Mary Ann Strong: Possibility, but I am not quite for sure. Connie is looking at those types of grants for small businesses, but I think that could be an option.

Jeff Hurst: This past year we had a lot of participation at the Recreation Park with Volleyball and Basketball, which starts in the fall and December. That is going to put a big damper on sports and they were really popular this year.

Mary Ann Strong: Soccer would be able to continue along with use of the fields after the ban is lifted.

Jeff Hurst: We have a lot come for soccer that need to use the restrooms in the building.

LaRhonda Lindsey: What kind of cuts overall are we looking at from the town?

Mary Ann Strong: I am not for sure overall, but the recreation park is being asked to cut \$226K. Craig, do you have the numbers?

Craig Earls: The existing fiscal year budget is \$408K and the requested amount is \$181K, which is a requested reduction of \$226K

Mary Ann Strong: I am very concerned if we close the pool. Fred/Jessica, how far behind are we on preparations?

Jessica Reynolds: We need to pressure wash and buy chemicals. We have not worked on it at this point.

Fred Phillips: We would need \$20K and 20-25 days. We have a couple of scenarios. If we open on June 10th without preparations we will not have a long season. If we prepare early, then we do not open, then we have wasted that money. If you leave it for 2 seasons, it will cost more to reopen it.

Tony Cordle: Joined Meeting. Mary Ann is this one individual, or more, driving the request?

Mary Ann Strong: Mr. Taylor handles the budget, and works with others to figure out a proposed budget, and the council works through it in planning meetings.

Tony Cordle: What are all of the reductions and where is the money? This is an unfair request.

Mary Ann Strong: The council doesn't put the budget together, but we have workshops to come up with adjustments and then we vote to approve the final budget.

Tony Cordle: This is a massive reduction request and people need to voice concerns. This is unacceptable.

Jeff Hurst: My question is what we do in January. How do we reopen?

Joe McCall: We are giving so much.

Tony Cordle: Where is the money going that is cut?

Mary Ann Strong: The entire town is going to be in a depression due to the virus, so all revenues will be down. The hard part with opening the pool is the unknown due to the Governor's order to close. That may be a hard sell to others. Could we keep the pool open longer?

Fred Phillips: We can keep it open longer, but when kids go back to school it will be hard.

LaRhonda Lindsey: Can we keep the chemicals until the next year if they are not used, and can we clean it and prepare now?

Fred Phillips: Yes, we can hold the chemicals over. The lady we get them from will probably buy them back if we need.

Jeff Hurst: We need to come up with a few recommendations for Mary Ann.

Mary Ann Strong: We need to come up with a plan so that Adrienne can crunch the numbers. We can reconvene after Monday's budget workshop. I would like all members of the Commission to attend the Facebook meeting.

Craig Earls: I think one of the areas they are looking to cut is staffing. With the pool we have to hire a lot of help which will keep the costs up.

Fred Phillips: We have had 10-15 part-time life guards. When you are dealing with the youth you are having a hard time finding them slots to work, but we only work 3 at a time. It is mandated that for every 25 swimmers you need 1 on staff for that time period.

LaRhonda Lindsey: My recommendation is to get the pool ready because the money is already there.

Fred Phillips: We have already cut a lot this year as well.

Mary Ann Strong: If we work to clean the pool, and can return chemicals if they are not needed, then we should not be out much if we prepare now.

Jeff Hurst: Our recommendation is to prepare the pool with existing funds and with the existing cuts that were made early this year during the closure. If they come back and say we don't want to open, can we leave the gym and courts open. The group agreed.

Craig Earls: It looks like most of the expense is employees with the pool, and that is a big area to cut. The kids need a place to come to and it helps keep them out of trouble. For some in the community this is the only place they get to come to.

Corey Whited: I like having it ready to go, even if it is late.

Mary Ann Strong: I think we will need give some more on the cuts.

Tony Cordle: If they want to cut 60%, then the pool has to go. That will be really bad for the community.

Fred Phillips: I would really hate to see the pool go away. A lot of people love and use that place. It is their summer get away.

Mary Ann Strong: We can't really have volunteers down there during the closure, but we should position it so that we have reduced staff and the savings should be enough to cover it. If it sets dormant it could be very hard on the pool. I can also look to get some donations as well.

Jeff Hurst: Let's just say that the ban doesn't let us open, can we open the other items there (weight lifting and gym)?

Mary Ann Strong: If it is open, I think we should have regular hours and reduce when school opens back up.

LaRhonda Lindsey: I think that is our best solution right now.

Frances Meadows: Do we have to ask the council to open the pool?

Craig Earls: It is already budgeted, so I do not think so. It is tricky because it straddles both budgets. I am just concerned that it won't be enough based on the proposed cuts.

Jeff Hurst: So, with the pool I think we are good. We do need to make one more recommendation.

Mary Ann Strong: I think the reduced schedule in the fall during school, and open during the week in the summer at regular hours is a good compromise.

Jessica Reynolds: The kids normally can get to the Recreation Park around 3:30, so I think 2:30-10PM. We will need to have staff there a little early to open up.

Fred Phillips: What about the other groups, like the college using it?

Mary Ann Strong: I think that will have to be case by case.

LaRhonda Lindsey: Maybe the college would like to donate. Also, if Cedar Bluff and Tazewell County could maybe put some in to help with funding.

Joe McCall: We still have money that has not be used this year. Can that be used next year since we are forced to close?

Mary Ann Strong: Yes, I there should be some left over due to the closure. We have let some employees go already. Also, you can get the full budget from the town hall so that you can see all the proposals.

Jeff Hurst: Can we summarize our recommendations?

Craig Earls: Based on the commission's feedback, we are proposing the following Recreation Park operating adjustments to support the budget reduction request:

1. Begin preparation on the pool by cleaning and purchasing necessary chemicals, with the assumption that they can be returned if the Governor does not authorize reopening after June 10th. If the anticipated opening will be after June 10th, then the timing will not support opening the pool. The funds to purchase chemicals to get the pool ready should come from the previously approved budget AND savings based on the existing closure. We are also looking for community involvement for volunteers and donations, as applicable, to assist in opening the pool.
2. While children are out of school, the Recreation Park should remain open at regular hours with full services. When children are returned to school, the Recreation Park should adopt an adjusted schedule of Monday-Friday 3:30-10:00PM, with staffing from 2:30-10:00PM, with regular hours on weekends. Any remaining budget due to the recent closure due to the COVID-19 virus should be rolled to the next fiscal year to offset future expenditures and not allocated to other parts of the Town of Richlands budget.

The group agreed with the recommendations.

No further comments.

Next meeting – TBD

Jeff Hurst - Adjourned meeting.