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Memorial Park Takes Center Stage at Tybee Council

By Cynthia Kinkel

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"This is just a summary of the work that's been done. The actual report is lengthy and will be delivered in the morning," said Janice Bentley, as she addressed Tybee's City Council on March 13 while unveiling Tybee's new Memorial Park Master Plan. "What we've attempted to do is incorporate all of elements we were given into a unique green space for Tybee's citizens and visitors of all ages. This area is very important to Tybee's future, and we have the opportunity to make it a bright, shining point for this community."

Commissioned in September of last year by the previous City Council, Bentley has been part of the effort to rethink and redesign Memorial Park, the centrally located public park located near City Hall. The ad hoc committee of citizen volunteers put an estimated 250 hours into meeting the previous council's resolution. The order was to provide a plan to place a number of facilities including a public safety building, a skateboard park, bicycle path, and a possible swimming pool, into the park which already houses a dog park, playground, volleyball and tennis courts as well as community shelters, a pavilion and a gymnasium.

Members of the Memorial Park Ad Hoc Master Planning Committee included Janice Bentley, chairman, resident at large; Deb Barreiro, Tybee Dog Park; Jimmy Carter, Veterans Memorial; Alan Jones, Tybee Beautification Association; Tim Malins, resident skateboarder; J. Curtis Hanks, YMCA Board; Laurie Montgomery, resident at large; Libby Bacon, Planning Commission, non-voting member; Gary Sanders, architect, non-voting member; Mimi Ferrell, Tybee Garden Club; and Wayne Harper, resident. Bentley said that volunteers had responded to the wishes of residents and property owners according to the City's 2007 Master Plan Survey.

Architect Gary Sanders of Ciphers Design, who spent more than 50 professional hours on the drawing also addressed the council. "We are all proud of this plan. Lots of people wanted lots of things. We tried to fit everything in an orderly fashion without taking anything away." Sanders mentioned that framing of the park, like Forsyth Park in Savannah, should be clearly defined with barrier and buffer landscaping and defined parking.

Besides placement of recreational and community facilities the plan addresses a number functional issues including improved drainage, storm water management, and preservation of green space. The plan calls for native coastal plantings that will require low water, and low maintenance and natural borders to delineate the spaces.

Tybee's present Fire Department and Rescue facilities would continue to operate near the corner of Jones and 5th Avenues under this proposal, but the committee recommended against building a new public safety complex to house the police department, court, jail, and animal control in the area as these things would lead to increased traffic, disruption of recreation activities, parking congestion, and concerns about the safety of small children nearby at the YMCA and playgrounds. A mobile helicopter pad will be placed closer to the YMCA and Fire Dept. No permanent pad will be erected so that standing water may be removed and to accommodate emergency vehicle access.

By consensus of the park committee as well as Tybee's local veterans, the new Veteran's Monument's proposed location is on the Jones Avenue side of the park, very close to the cemetery, but with an unobstructed view from Butler as well. The plan also calls for a pedestrian bike trail wide enough for a two-way bike path, pedestrians and wheelchairs.

Both the dog park and skate park were included in Sander's scale drawing. Located on the Butler Avenue side of Memorial Park in front of the gym, the 4000 square foot concrete bowl and skatepark layout is actually buffered by the gym, with vegetative screening and security fencing, while the dog park is closer to Butler Avenue with an entrance into the gym parking lot.

Memorial Park's original pavilions are also scheduled to be restored with direction from historian, Cullen Chambers and new signage and lighting will also be employed.

The committee also recommended a time line for implementation in phases over a three-year period. Both Bentley and Sanders stated that grant

money may be available for much of the work and pointed out that a civil engineer should be employed to break down the costs and direct the phases. They also specifically requested the council's feedback within 30 days, and called for a 60 day public comment period.

After the presentation, Mayor Jason Buelterman commended the commission and suggested that the plan be displayed on the City's website so that the public might view it, but Councilwoman Wanda Doyle stated that she wanted to look at it before submitting it to the web site, and Councilman Dick Smith agreed. "The public is not meant to see it on the website until the plan is approved," Smith said.

Councilman Paul Wolff disagreed, "We need to ask people what they think before we finalize this. This is the public's park. We need to give everyone on the island the right to see it." At that point, Doyle agreed, as did Councilman Charlie Brewer. Councilman Barry Brown questioned the types of plants to be used, and the costs of maintenance. Councilman Eddie Crone mentioned the fact that the proposed bike and pedestrian path will be going in front of the fire station, pointing to Fire Chief Skip Sasser's concerns that doing so would pose a potential safety hazard.

After the meeting, members of the planning committee stated that such traffic already travels past the area, but might be altered with input from Sasser. Committee member Libby Bacon stated, "Now that the drawing is complete, it's in the public's best interest to understand the plan as it is being presented so everyone can have input."

Former Councilman, Mallory Pearce rose to state his agreement with the planning committee's recommendations against placing a new public safety building across from a residential neighborhood. Former Council woman Kathryn Williams pointed out the overall number of volunteer hours, time and money that's involved in supporting volunteer efforts on the island. Williams asked that the Council consider the planning committee's request for public input in view of the sheer time that's been invested. "This is the community's space!" Williams stated. "Everyone should be given the opportunity to voice their opinions."

Resident Elizabeth Hodges read the results of the latest online public survey concerning placement of the skatepark in Memorial Park conducted by Tybee Neighbors. She described the efforts made to verify the e-mail addresses of the respondents and stated, "A very diverse group of people responded to this survey. Out of 209 local responses, 72.2 percent favored the idea, and nearly 60 percent not only favored it but stated it should be placed back in Memorial Park. 56.9 percent also stated that the \$60,000 should go back into the budget to pay for its construction." Tybee Neighbors did the survey after learning that council members had decided to reallocate the funds previously set aside for the facility.

Hodges said that only 27.8% of the residents who responded were against having a skatepark on Tybee Island - figures that contradict claims from the Tybee Island Residents and Property Owners Association that an overwhelming majority of Tybee's citizens are against placing the skateboard park anywhere on the island. Comments are available on the website at www.tybeeneighbors.com. Hodges announced that the next survey will focus on the Memorial Park Master Plan.

Later in the evening, the council resolved to put the Memorial Park Plan on the agenda of the upcoming April workshop, and to allow it to be viewed on the City's website after a brief review - at least in time to meet the planning committee's request for public review within 60 days of presentation.

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