

# HIGHLAND PARK

## FUTURE USE REPORT

(Formerly known as Highland Country Club)



**Paul Heroux, Mayor**

**February 2019**



## History

On 25 January 2018, Highland Country Club, the 117-year-old golf course, filed for bankruptcy. At first, I stated that I didn't have any concern about the construction of homes on this land. "If a developer were to buy the land, they would still need to go through the process of getting approval to build, which is fine," I said in an email to The Sun Chronicle. "Good neighbors are good for our City." As such, the City would not be interested in acquiring the property because of "other pressing budget and capital needs."

However, several City officials explained to me the benefit of the City acquiring this land, as well as the consequences of up to 130 additional homes being built. It didn't take me more than a few minutes of listening to the Recreation Director Dennis Walsh, the City Assessor Stan Nacewicz, and the City Land Planner Gary Ayrassian to convince me that it was in the City's best interest to acquire this land.

Between February 2018 and June 2018, I held several meetings with various department heads concerning how the City could afford to pay for this land without raising taxes, how we would propose acquiring this land to the community and the City Council, and what the City might do with the land.

On 19 June 2018, the Municipal Council held a public hearing where an estimated 100 people showed up to voice their opinion about whether or not the City should purchase this land. Approximately 5 people spoke in opposition to the City's purchase of the land, while the vast majority spoke in favor of the City acquiring this land.

The Sun Chronicle reported that "To make Heroux's goal a reality, the council must authorize borrowing \$3 million before Sept. 1 to beat a 120-day deadline set by a law governing the City's "right of first refusal" for the property. Eight votes are needed to approve the plan. Only 10 members of the 11-member panel can vote because councilor Richard Conti, whose home abuts Highland, recused himself."

At the 19 June 2018 hearing, the City Council did not permit discussion of future use of the land. The discussion before the Council was limited to "why should the City purchase this land?" Answering that question, dozens of people spoke about their connection to the land. They spoke about the history of the land and its significance to the City. They also spoke about

how this land was and is a jewel in the City and it should be preserved for future generations' recreational use. Virtually no one wanted to see homes built on this property.

Out-of-state developers were present to advocate against the City purchasing the land. They were met with considerable opposition by citizens of Attleboro.

In the end, with the backing of the Mayor and the City Council, on 26 June 2018, the City Council voted 10-0 to authorize the Mayor to purchase this land. And on 1 September 2018, the City took possession of Highland Country Club.

## **Task-force Selection Process**

On 19 June 2018, when I requested that the City Council authorize the appropriation for this land, I offered the City Council that I may form a task-force made up of citizens to help me determine the intended use of the land. The point of such a task-force was to determine: what the people of Attleboro would like done with this land? What things would they like to see on it? How should it be used? How would we like to see this land be used generations after we are gone? What do we not want to see done with this land? These were some of the questions we pondered.

After the City took possession of the land, I put together a task-force.

I requested a letter of interest from interested citizens of Attleboro describing what they would like to see happen with this land and some ideas.

I received about 60 letters from citizens. I went through each of the letters to determine if the people who were interested in serving on my task-force had the same vision that was understood from the testimony at the public hearing in June, as well as what some of their ideas were.

Of those letters, I selected two people from each Ward, with the exception of Ward 2, which had three people. Ward 2 is the home of this land. Additionally, I invited three City Councilors to participate on this task-force – City Councilors from Wards 4, 5 and 6. In selecting members, I included people who I knew, and people I did not know. New names to City governance, and names of people who had served on boards and commissions in the past. I also included recommendations from Recreation Director Dennis Walsh and City councilor Sara

Reynolds. Finally, I made the task-force as balanced as I could between males and females, which was not an easy task considering that the male to female ratio was 3:1 for submitted letters. The letters continue to help guide policy making and deliberations about the future use of this land.

Task-force members included:

- Lynne Mendes, Ward 1
- Philip Cotsalas, Ward 1
- George Piggott, Ward 2
- Laure Kelley, Ward 2
- Peter Gay, Ward 2
- Margie Kelley Fitzpatrick, Ward 3
- Peyton Crowe, Ward 3
- Heather Whitehead, Ward 4
- Carol Konvalinka-Connolly, Ward 4
- Daryl Velez, Ward 5
- Fred Uriot, Ward 5
- Leo Johnson, Ward 6
- Robert Withers, Ward 6
- Diana Holmes, City Council
- Kate Jackson, City Council
- Laura Dolan, City Council
- Paul Heroux, Mayor & Task-force Chair

## Task-force Hearings

With the task-force members selected, I established the expectations of the task-force.

At our meetings we would:

- 1) keep all task-force deliberations open to the public,
- 2) listen to ideas from community members,
- 3) discuss all of the community's ideas among the task-force members,
- 4) vote on all of the community's ideas,
- 5) create a report be created based on the process, the community's ideas, and the vote tallies.

To stay within the scope of the task-force, which was to determine what the citizens would like to see done with this land, we did not discuss various things. For example, how much ideas would cost to implement, where something would go if it were implemented, if different

ideas conflicted with each other, or if ideas would pass the zoning board or conservation commission. These issues are important but they are not relevant to the scope of determining what the citizens of the City would like to see done with the land, which was the goal of the task-force.

It was also communicated to the task-force and the public that ideas presented by the community members and voted on by the task-force are not binding. In other words, the 'Future Use Task-Force' was put together to help the current mayor and future mayors determine what the land should be used for based on the wishes of the people today who supported the acquisition of this land.

However, no mayor is constrained by the ideas that have emerged from this task-force. The needs of the City always come first and there are unanticipated needs that may arise that can only be accommodated by utilizing this land. While preferences of citizens were known at the time of the public hearings, City residents understood when we purchased this land that the needs of the City always come first.

Additionally, this task-force is not subject to the open meeting law. In the "Open Meeting Law Guide, it states that "The law excludes the Legislature and its committees, bodies of the judicial branch, and *bodies appointed by a constitutional officer solely for the purpose of advising a constitutional officer.*" (emphasis added) This was based on the Supreme Judicial Court ruling *Connelly v. School Committee of Hanover*, 4009 Mass. 232 (1991). As such, minutes were not recorded and Robert's Rules were not followed. This however, did not undermine or interfere with the attempts to be systematic or transparent.

All of the meetings were: open to the public in the City Council chambers, and broadcast on our local cable station DoubleACS (except for the second meeting discussing the ideas presented to the task-force; it was an honest mistake made by DoubleACS where they didn't schedule the meeting and therefore didn't cover it). The Sun Chronicle was invited to cover any meetings they would like. There were no "future use" meetings held out of the public's view. We held three public meetings to take input from the public about what ideas the public had about the future use of this land. The dates of these meetings were 12 September 2018 24 September 2018, and 20 October 2018. Additionally, we met on 29 November 2018, 3 January

2019, and 7 February 2019 to discuss the ideas that had been presented to the task-force and then to vote on them. The format for each of these three meetings followed that the task-force members would discuss each idea and then when discussion was finished, there would be a vote on the idea.

## Ideas from the Community

Citizens who presented ideas on 12 September 2018 about the future use of this land include:

- Roy Immoulan
- Allen Ashley
- Bridget Gay
- Dan Allen
- Dan Smith
- Roxanne Houghton
- Brad Pitman
- Diane Babezinger
- Henry Riley
- Leo Johnson
- Bob Withers
- Lynne Mendes
- Diana Holmes
- Robin Salvas
- George Piggot

Citizens who presented ideas on 24 September 2018 about the future use of this land include:

- Kay Brennan Baroni
- Peter Clark
- Ellen Parker
- Bill Bowles
- Bob Rainville
- Marty Crowl
- Phil Constalas
- Laura Dolan
- Maurie Donahu
- Margie Kelly
- Diana Holmes
- Derek Corsi

Citizens who presented ideas on 20 October 2018 about the future use of this land include:

- Ben Cuto
- Juliet Textier
- Frank Balut
- Carol Shapiro
- Ellen Farmer
- Gary Krofta
- Cicilia Woodworth
- Jane Teag-Urbach
- Carol Conlon
- Margie Kelly

On 29 November 2018, the cross-country coaches from Attleboro High School and Bishop Feehan High School appeared before the task-force to talk about their desire to see a cross-country course with fitness stations as a possible future use of the land. This was the only time that we allowed testimony from members of the public that was not part of a regularly scheduled public input meeting.

On 13 December 2018, the Doran family donated \$50,000 to the construction of the Mark Coogan Cross-Country Course, named after Attleboro native and 1996 US Olympic Cross-Country team member Mark Coogan. This donation ensured the creation of a cross-country course. The City's Park and Forestry Department working with the cross-country coaches of Attleboro High School and Bishop Feehan and Mark Coogan are currently designing the cross-country course, which is expected to be open and ready for use in April, 2019.

All of the ideas presented to the task-force by members of the public were voted on by members of the task-force. Not all members of the task force were present when voting occurred; attendance at a task-force meeting was optional.

As the chair of the task-force, I reserved my vote only to break a tie, which was never necessary. Once the ideas that were put together in a list, on three separate evenings, the task-force voted about whether or not the ideas presented by the public would be adopted by the task-force.

## Aggregated Ideas presented to the HCC Future Use Committee

Below are the ideas that were presented to the task-force by members of our community, and the final tally of votes by members of the task-force after the proposed idea. Several ideas were offered by multiple people. For example, on the first night of public input, several people suggested that the land continue to be a golf course. However, preserving a golf course was an unlikely 'future use' for several reasons. The first was that the Trustees auctioned off the sprinkler heads to the irrigation system. The greens were damaged and would take years to repair at a high cost. Another reason was that the 'needs of the City' demanded that a portion of the land would be used for a 350-car parking lot for the construction workers who were building a new high school across the street. Without this parking lot workers' cars would be throughout the neighborhood or parked in Capron Park, destroying O'Connell Field for a number of years. Additionally, adjacent to the parking lot, the staging ground for the materials will make it so that materials do not need to be assembled elsewhere. As a result, it is expected to save the construction costs for the new high school about \$2.5 million. This money per the MSBA rules and requirements spelled out in the 'project funding agreement' must either be reinvested into the high school or given back to the state.

We voted over the course of three different sessions. The dates of the discussion and subsequent voting were: 29 November 2018, 3 January 2019, and 7 February 2019.

### Accepted Ideas by the Task-Force and Vote Tally

- 1) Allow fireworks to be put on by the City for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July **8-1**
- 2) Allow for Bochy to be played at this Park **6-2**
- 3) Create a 9-hole disk golf **9-2**
- 4) Create a community garden **9-0**
- 5) Create a Cross Country Course **14-0**
- 6) Create a playground for kids **8-0**
- 7) Create an area for picnic table areas / BBQ pits for family functions **9-0**

- 8) Create walking and biking trails for summer use / snow shoeing and cross-country skiing in the winter **9-0**
- 9) Develop fields into wooded areas or meadows **8-1**
- 10) Erect a bathroom facility somewhere on the grounds **6-2**
- 11) Erect a greenhouse for use by the school department as well as members of the community **7-2**
- 12) Erect an amphitheater or half shell so that various community groups and the high school performing arts program can hold performances in this park weather permitting **5-4**
- 13) Erect fitness stations along the cross-country course **6-2**
- 14) HCC Club House could become a banquet facility – privately run **9-0**
- 15) Support an ice skating or hockey in the pond area, and sledding in the hilly areas **9-0**
- 16) Support the development of fields of flowers or a tulip garden **9-0**

#### **Rejected Ideas by the Task-Force**

- 1) Allow the club house to be leased for events (proms, meetings, special elections, etc.) – City run **1-8**
- 2) Allow the YMCA to lease land **0-9**
- 3) Create a dog park **1-8**
- 4) Create a golf course and driving range – privately leased **2-6**
- 5) Create a golf course and driving range – publicly run **2-7**
- 6) Create new multisport fields **1-7**
- 7) Create pickle ball courts **3-6**
- 8) Place the Attleboro Farmers Market on this land **0-9**
- 9) Retrofit the HCC Club House to become a senior center **4-5**
- 10) Support a portion of this land becoming developed housing **0-9**
- 11) Use a portion of the land to erect a solar farm **0-9**
- 12) Use the land for affordable housing **0-9**

## **Next Steps**

The next step is going to be for my administration and subsequent administrations to consider using this “future use” list and report to help determine which ideas have the community support to be pursued for implementation.

There are 16 approved ideas. Not all 16 need to be or even should be implemented. Other ideas may be presented and implemented because the times call for it, or the needs of the City require it. Different funding opportunities may arise that are too good to pass up and this Park may be the ideal place to locate something that was unforeseen at the time of the purchase of the land and the task-force meetings.

This report is a guide. It is not a directive. It offers ideas that may be pursued, but not must be pursued.

This report also does not conclude the deliberations of the policy direction that my administration or that subsequent administrations will have with respect to the development of Highland Park. The development of this land into a beautiful park for many to enjoy for generations to come is something that will require years to accomplish. It would be imprudent to rush the development of this park. Proper planning and implementation of ideas will take years.

**Paul Heroux**

**Mayor of Attleboro**

**14 February 2019**