

**Recreation Board  
Meeting Minutes  
2 / 18 / 21**

**I. Call to Order**

**II. Roll Call:**

**Present: Ken Bogard, Chair; Craig Bennett; Mike Smith, Mayor; Kevin Ackley and Wes Cole**

**Absent: Holli Morrish**

**Staff: Casey Wooddell, Director and Deanna Barbour**

**III. Special Guest Speaker – Mr. Olson**

Mr. Wooddell welcomed Mr. Ross Olson and asked for an introduction and for him to give some background on why he's here today. Mr. Olson advised he manages the farmers market in town and has a background and degree in Natural Resources Management, adding he generally has an interest in land use and land management. This is an issue that is important to him and he hopes will become increasingly important to everybody and wants to talk about opportunities for positive land uses around the community of Oxford. The area that has caught his eye and other local residents is Merry Day Park. Mr. Olson shared a rendering of the proposed development for the Topss Food pantry site. The food pantry was approved by the City, and this new food pantry would be in an approximately 5000 sq. ft. building which would include a new water retention pond on the Merry Day Park site. (Note: This project is not currently being pursued by the applicant or TOPSS organization). What Mr. Olson wants to discuss is his particular interest and proposal for development in an area in Merry Day Park that would be devoted to native plants. This proposition has been brought before the Environmental Commission and they recommended pursuing it. Mr. Olson suggested presenting it to Parks and Recreation, since it is a City Park. So this was brought to City Council and they agreed this was something to go forward with so here we are. Mr. Olson said he wants to answer any questions and sort of hear the thoughts of the Recreation Commission about the kind of use this park space gets and what the plans are for it going forward in the future and the role of more biodiversity in City Parks and recreational spaces. Mr. Bogard asked when you're talking about native plant environment are we talking about edible foods or native plants or grasses. Mr. Olson asked are you talking about native in general or plant use in the park itself. Mr. Bogard said both categories. Mr. Olson explained there are many species of native plants that are edible and tasty and useful for people as well as many types of wildlife. Being able to provide those can be a nice amenity. There are many plants that are only edible to very particular species of birds, insects and wildlife and the availability of native plants to insect communities is surprisingly a real issue.

Many people are familiar with monarchs and milkweed, but others not so much. Insect species, whether its butterflies, caterpillars or beetles are typically very dependent on one or a handful of species and oak trees are the greatest supporters of abundant ecosystems and are an important habitat and food for many insects and wildlife. They are also long living plants that provide shade, lovely views and fall colors. Mr. Bogard noted that's what he was looking for, so it's not a community garden where people plant tomatoes and stuff but rather geared toward plants for butterflies, etc.

Mr. Bennett stated this might sound basic in general, but when you're going around talking about this, what is the good thing this will add to the community and he's also

curious about the location and why you feel this is a prime spot for this purpose. Mr. Olson said I'm glad you asked that question actually because I wanted to mention a big inspiration to me and the reason why I pursue this is because of the writing of an entomologist and ecologist named Doug Tallamy who is now getting notoriety for his project he calls Home-Grown National Park. Which is an initiative to encourage people to replace at least half of their landscapes with plants that are beneficial to pollinators or our native varieties of plants. Mr. Olson encouraged everyone to look up Mr. Tallamy's work and maybe get a more specific idea of the types of proposals he's asking the Recreation Board to consider. As far as Merry Day Park's existence, my affiliation through the Oxford Farmers Market with Topss Food Pantry and having been back there to sort of see this proposed location for their planned or designed expansion that they proposed before they moved into the family resource center is where his interest came from.

The area is around 4 ½ acres of land and has a lot of unfulfilled potential. Mr. Wooddell said it's a pretty wide open green space, and agree it's underutilized and offers plenty of area to decide other uses. With that being said, it's also an extremely wet area. So you and your crew would need to look into the drainage issues and how that would affect your plantings. Mr. Wooddell also appreciates Mr. Bogard's question to define if this is for a food garden or just plantings and explaining that we're not talking about food gardens. He thinks if we're not talking about that and we're only talking about local wildlife etc., this makes it a much easier task. Mr. Wooddell added he thinks this is a good use, or good potential use for this park. Would be good information for us to know what these plantings would look like and where they would go as we progress. Mr. Olson advised both Topss and the family resource center has an interest and have had some small plantings done on their property.

They do have until 2023 to move forward with this site, but currently don't have plans to move forward with the project as proposed. Mr. Olson would like to propose a 10,000 square foot area in the park, which is approximately a quarter of an acre or 100ft x 100ft area that could be planted with natives to the area. Some questions have been asked about the deer in the area, but thinks this could be done and then assessed how the deer and other wild life have on it. Mr. Bogard said other questions on expansion, if we start out with 10,000sq ft. we could decide later to double this. Mr. Ackley asked are these spaces meant to be in the middle of the park or on the edges of it. Mr. Olson said he's looking at areas and plants that are more tolerant to water to be placed there to maybe help with the soil conditions and possibly the drainage issues in some of these areas. That idea may be unrealistically ambitious, but is a thought. Another area that may be a good candidate for development is the northern property boundary which is already kind of undeveloped woody-forested kind of area. It might make a nice transitional zone in the park. Depending on how this gets laid out it would be nice for people to walk by it and be able to enjoy the interactive and educational opportunities he's proposing. Thinks the fence line is an area to consider especially for expansion and then again the corner lot. Does this make sense, and does anyone have questions?

Mr. Wooddell thinks it makes sense and looks like he's targeting the boundary areas of the property and thinks we could look at something closer to the playground and or closer to the park that could be used for educational purposes. Also a part of the OATS trail is potentially coming through this area and that could be used also. Mr. Olson stated he's very hopeful for that and thinks Merry Day has great potential and opportunity for the trail to be an access point. That is something I want to keep in consideration in any proposal is how a planting or an area like that might affect the

trail. Merry Day could definitely be used as a demonstration garden or interactive garden which is what he's thinking of. Mr. Bennett said glad you brought up the trail Mr. Wooddell. Some of the questions you're getting Mr. Olson are because we're trying to figure out what the result will be with this project. Mr. Bennett stated he likes the idea of the trail, and is saying this so respectfully, he is for this and likes what Mr. Olson is doing, but we're trying to figure out the why of the project first and then decide maybe it's the right thing and a good thing to do and feels there has to be more of how this is going to benefit the community. We're always protecting property and if someone wants to do something we want to know what is the why and how is it going to benefit the City of Oxford. Mr. Olson said absolutely, that's a great question and noted he's here to start this conversation because there seems to be a lot of interest in the community and in society in general. There's certainly a growing group of people that's very interested in the impact of native plants, biodiversity, climate and ecology. Mr. Olson said I know we're talking about City Parks and city property, recreation and public space and you know the value or appeal or attraction of it and I'm very happy to be here talking to this Board today about the possibility of some kind of a project happening. Mr. Olson is proposing this project and asked for feedback from the Board.

Mr. Bogard asked Mayor Smith what is your reaction to this and where is this in the overall comp plan? Mr. Smith advised we've really just begun route planning for the piece of the trail that goes through this part of town and talking about where this location would be on the timeline. Overall the reaction to this is good and sustainability is one of Council's goals for this year, and native plants figure into that.

Mr. Smith noted he thinks what needs balance here is knowing the trail may come through there and maintaining as much green space as we can for a park because there just isn't any place out there next to the mobile home park or any place for kids to go and have some green parkland to play in. There's not enough for kids right now. Mr. Smith stated he's happy to talk about this and thinks everyone is supportive of it and the next steps would be to take this plan and put some areas on it to show Council and get their reaction. If this Board blesses it, he thinks Council will not have a problem with it. Mr. Smith feels it's really deciding where we could go and what size space it could take up and presenting that to Council. Mr. Olson said Mr. Smith, I would be happy to develop a more formal presentation for Council. Mr. Smith stated not much needed, maybe a diagram of what you're thinking of and examples of what you've done.

Mr. Bennett sees this as a possible destination point for those walking the trail, to see what is in bloom and then being able to read about the plants and what and who they benefit.

Ms. Carla Blackmar stated she was curious to know if there's been a needs analysis done related to how this park is currently being used and what the goals are for it in the City Parks Plan. Mr. Wooddell said that's an outstanding question Ms. Blackmar and one of our topics of discussion has been and will continue to be, and is actually on today's agenda, is a Parks Master Plan. Our existing plan is from 1997, so it's not really relevant at this point, so the Recreation Board has requested the recommendation letter and update to that plan and we will discuss that again in today's meeting. In general we don't currently have a needs analysis on how Merry Day Park is to be used. A project like this from my perspective as a Parks Director, sounds like the Recreation Board agrees is a great use of land space that's underutilized right now. Mr. Smith said it's about the only green space in the area for the mobile home community and a little farther down the road is Park View Arms and some other housing developments.

They don't have a lot of green space in that area, so we do want to maintain as much of that as we can at the same time. Ms. Blackmar noted she thinks that would be hugely helpful and one important part of this is to ensure that it's meeting the needs of the residents in the surrounding community. Mr. Wooddell noted it sounds like the Recreation Board supports this general idea, but we would like to see maybe some areas on a map and what that may look like and how this could tie into the trail. Maybe see some of those renderings Mr. Smith was talking about, thinks that would help with where these native plantings would go in relation to the trail.

Mr. Olson thanked everyone and Mr. Wooddell for putting this together. He feels like this has sparked a very productive discussion about some of the future plans in Parks and Recreation in Oxford. Mr. Olson knows there is an RFP out on the final stage of the trail and hopes that whatever presentation he's able to pull together hopefully can be considered to be included in the final portion of the trail. Mr. Olson noted he's happy to collaborate on the process and thanked everyone. Mr. Wooddell thanked Mr. Olson for his time adding he knows there is support for this when additional individuals are brought to the meeting. Until then we will try to get a timeline on what the design plan is on that route of the trail.

## **I. Old Business**

**A. Facilities** – Mr. Wooddell advised he is back to recreating an RFP for the tennis and pickleball courts and hoping to have those finished by next week. This will include one new tennis court, four new pickle ball courts completely resurfaced all brand new. It should be a great addition. If we can get the RFP out for a couple weeks, then a couple weeks of submissions, then choose a contractor, then maybe we could see something by May or June would be more realistic on getting the work completed.

**B. Parks Master Plan** – Mr. Wooddell shared the recommendation letter that was submitted to the City Manager Doug Elliott and asked if the Board would recommend this letter being submitted directly to City Council since it did not make it to them. If the Recreation Board is supporting this, the TRI Board in our last meeting indicated their full support of this recommendation letter and they are willing to sign all of their names to this letter as well. Mr. Smith thinks it will be good to have the TRI Board on there and doesn't think all of Council understands how the TRI Board interfaces with the City and the TRI property. Mr. Smith doesn't know if Mr. Elliott just got too busy to talk to him as to why this didn't move forward but Council should know about this and thinks they will be supportive.

Mr. Bennett asked if this is the one that would be folded into the main plan being done for the City because it would be cheaper than doing it on its own. Mr. Wooddell said right, there's pro's and con's both ways. I agree the pro is that it would be cheaper so something can get done, but the con is it won't be a true Parks Master Plan, it'll just be pieces of a master plan built into an overall city plan. The '97 plan was phenomenal, at least for that time because of all the recommendations and thought that were able to be put into it, because it was so specific. To parks, recreation, operations, new facilities, the building of the community park, the renovation of the uptown parks and the relocation of the aquatic center and building of a dog park. All these things were built into that '97 plan and have been accomplished, so it's expensive. Mr. Wooddell advised a new master plan costs \$50,000 – 100,000 dollars. Mr. Bennett asked can't we have just a higher expectation from the city plan to have more parks and rec input? Mayor Smith noted what we've decided to do is instead of doing a giant comprehensive plan redo, is to address certain areas we think need to be looked at. So if Council knows that we need to address Parks and Recreation, you know this can be

added in. As an update, Mr. Smith thinks at this point we're only going to update a couple of the sections of the plan, but we could put this in there as well, so this kind of gets updated by itself and be more specific to this than just part of the big comprehensive plan. The last comprehensive plan was a little vague and areas need to be more specific and thinks Council would agree to add a more specific focus.

Mr. Bogard noted he thinks from his standpoint Parks and Recreation in major cities are important for attracting people to come to your community and to live in your community. It's an amenity to have recreational facilities that are attractive. When he looks at other communities, like Metro Parks and Fairfield, they have an important mission themselves in terms of improving the quality of life through recreation.

Mr. Wooddell said I think you said that perfectly Mr. Bogard. The first sentence of our mission statement is "to enhance quality of life", so it all fits and I think if we ask Council to focus specifically on Park and Recreation it would benefit us greatly because most of our objectives that are in the existing comp plan have been completed or are in the process. Even the 2008 comp plan is outdated for us and there are very few items that haven't been completed or started on, so if we could get some new direction and some future guidance on Parks and Recreation facilities and uses of spaces that would give us the direction we need in order to continue our operation in the most efficient way. Mr. Bogard thinks working together as two organizations can develop a plan for the next five or ten years. Mr. Wooddell said the 2008 comp plan very specifically stated as one of its objectives to "update the parks and recreation master plan" and that never did occur and here we are 13 years later. The plan we have in place as a guide to update where we are certainly fits.

Mr. Wooddell asked should we have a motion to sign the TRI Board onto this letter and resubmit to City Council? Mr. Bogard thinks it would be wise to march together with the TRI and thinks we should include them. Mayor Smith motions we include the TRI Board onto our letter about the updated Parks and Recreation master plan and submit it to City Council. Mr. Bennett seconded. All aye.

Mr. Wooddell thanked the board stating this is an important step as we move forward.

## **New business**

**Dog Park** – Miami planning class – Mr. Wooddell is working with a senior planning class (taught by Councilor David Prytherch) on relocating our dog park. Our dog park right now has been around since 2011 and it's very heavily used, in fact it's overused and a giant mud mess most of the time. There's not enough parking and there's just a lot of issues with its current location. What was great is that it was started and funded by a group of local volunteers and what it's shown is that it's very important to the community. What we want to do is consider relocating to a bigger space to accommodate the need that's been proven in the existing location. That doesn't mean we have to get rid of the existing dog park it just means we probably need a second one at a different site. This class will be looking for a second location to add as an additional dog park and will research this and make a recommendation in about three weeks on a possible new location. This is an important project for a senior class that they can really put some thought into. Mr. Wooddell noted we gave them a little direction and asked them to look at Leonard Howell as a possible location and looking at the other side of Bonham road as a possibility also with around 9 acres available

there. If we could find 2 acres of land it would drastically improve our ability to provide a dog park to the community. Mr. Bogard added the current dog park on Morning Sun Road with parking is a dangerous site. Mr. Wooddell agreed adding it is not ideal.

**Field 5 project** – Mr. Wooddell shared a pic of field five at OCP. One of the baseball fields at the park is being renovated, it was a full size adult softball field essentially and wasn't getting a lot of use. So we decided last year to renovate that into three smaller youth size baseball /softball fields. One is now completely finished with backstops installed for fields five and six that are in the outfield area of that same field. Miami Little League has agreed to completely fund the infield dirt portion on one of those fields as soon as the weather is workable. The goal is to have one of these fields ready to go by spring for little league to play on and hopefully in next year's budget we'll get some money to finish outfield six. Eventually this will give us six baseball /softball fields at OCP, plus try for a total of seven whereas we currently have five total.

Mr. Wooddell advised he thinks it's going to be a really good use of space for us, it will lend itself to tournaments in the future for youth tournaments. This was asked as a capital improvement project for 2021 and was not approved, so with reallocating some funds and the assistance from Miami little league this will be accomplished by 2022.

Mr. Bogard asked when is the next joint meeting with the TRI Board? Mr. Wooddell asked Mr. Bogard and Mr. Curry if they could meet again, adding he thinks if doing small meetings in between the regular meetings would be very helpful.

Mayor Smith motioned to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Cole seconded the motion. All aye.

Meeting adjourned at 12:31pm.

Next Recreation Board meeting: **March 18, 2021 – 11:30am**