

WILKINSBURG BOROUGH
Council Special Meeting
May 22, 2013

CALL TO ORDER

President Cohn called the meeting to order at approximately 7:15 PM in Council Chambers, second floor of the Municipal Building, 605 Ross Ave., Wilkinsburg, PA.

ROLL CALL

The roll was called to establish a quorum. Present were: Mr. Lefebvre, Ms. Moore, Ms. Goodman, Ms. McCarthy-Johnson (via telephone) and President Cohn. Also present was Marla P. Marcinko, Borough Manager. Mayor John Thompson, Ms. Ervin, Ms. Evans, Ms. Trice and Ms. Macklin were absent. A quorum was established.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Following the pledge of allegiance, a moment of silence was observed to remember victims of violent crime.

President Cohn opened the meeting by informing attendees that the purpose of the meeting is to discuss the pros and cons of designating part of Whitney Park for use by dogs off leash. President Cohn requested that speakers limit their time to three minutes and groups may select a spokesperson to represent several persons with similar comments. President Cohn advised that a decision would not be made at this meeting and the purpose of obtaining public comment is to seek a reasonable solution. The insurance carrier has been consulted and there is no preclusion in the Borough's policy in having a park with an off leash area for dogs and there is no additional premium.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Marty Fruendt 335 Barnes St. – Mr. Fruendt expressed concern with the use of the park by dogs off leash. Parking problems have been created with people parking on Verdi Way, in resident's driveways and on the grass at the field. He stated he is a dog owner and expressed concerns with the behavior of some of the dogs and their owners. He stated that a significant number of owners let their dogs off leash in areas outside the ball field. He stated that dog feces are left by owners who don't clean up after their dogs. Off leash areas can push people away who may be interested in other park use. Since May 1, 2013, problems continue with parking and dogs off leash despite the fact that these prohibitions are clearly posted.

President Cohn reminded everyone that it is illegal to have dogs off leash and the police should be called.

Kevin Huddleson 527 Mifflin Ave. - Supports the use of the park for an off leash area for dogs. He believes this activity leads to be better balanced dog which needs space to exercise. He stated

that the majority of dog owners using the park are law-abiding and civic-minded. He stated that the ball field does not serve its current design and use of the park as an off leash area contributes to a sense of security and stability for the community.

Manya Mankiewicz – 810 South Ave. – Sees the dog park as a great resource for the community and views this to be an opportunity to define the space and establish regulations.

Brandon Boan – 810 South Ave. – Sees this time as an opportunity to better organize the park and its maintenance. He stated it is important to use the park to create a strong sense of community. He stated his experiences with the off leash area have been very positive although he doesn't live close to the park. A set of ground rules should be established and enforced.

Evan Aiello – 923 S. Trenton Ave. – Has lived at this address since 2002. He stated that there is excessive and sustained noise with dogs barking and the neighbors of the park are constantly cleaning up. He believes a good way to build community is through other efforts, such as the park clean-ups which were started in 2002. He believes there is a liability issue with an off leash area and is concerned with commercial use by dog obedience trainers and dog walkers. He stated that Pittsburgh Magazine listed the area as a dog park and referenced his address for the location. He has people coming through his yard as a result. He is a dog owner.

Chad Chalmers - 408 Hampton Ave. – Stated he is opposed to the off leash use. He cited concerns with dog fighting. The Police Department should not have to spend time on enforcement. Mr. Chalmers suggested removing the gate to solve the issues.

Alys Cheatle – 435 Franklin Ave. – Stated Wilkinsburg is a good match for her with being close to Frick Park and Whitney Park. She sees most users of the off leash area as very responsible.

Mike Milberger – 311 Barnes St. – Presented a petition to Council signed by twenty-six people who live in homes which surround the park. He read the petition aloud. He stated there is an increase in dog feces in peoples' back yards and a noise nuisance.

Ms. McCarthy-Johnson arrived at approximately 7:37 p.m.

Stephanie Schneider- 527 Mifflin Ave. – Commented that some dog owners did attend and participate in the recent clean-up of the park. She stated that the park is safer now since it has been used as an off leash area. She thinks this is a good time to further develop and refine a plan for use of the park for everyone. She agrees that rules are needed and parking is an issue. A legitimate dog park empowers users to enforce appropriate and respectful use. She stated that there may be an opportunity to generate revenue with permits for off leash use. She stated that off leash dog parks are representative of vibrant communities.

Tom Reichner 540 Allenby Ave. – Stated he lives about five blocks from the park and understands the concerns raised. He proposed that there should be restrictions on times of use and use should be by permit. He provided a sample sign and notes to Council.

Adeel Khan – 219 W. Hutchinson Ave. – Sees the park as a positive asset to the community and agrees that parking is an issue. He understands that there was previously a lot of crime in the park before it was used for dog walking. He agrees with a paid permit system.

Jennifer Wertz – 408 Lamar Ave. – Stated she uses the park everyday and lives close enough to the park to be familiar. She hasn't observed the parking problem and believes users do police each other. She supports the posting of signs and believes the dog park builds a sense of community. She suggested limiting the number of dogs per person and a permit system for authorized use.

Daniel McAffery – 615 S. Braddock Ave. – Commented that he had used the field for baseball before it fell into a state of disrepair. He supports the use of the area as a dog park.

Linda Law – 908 Wood St. – Stated that she serves on the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board and that an assessment of all parks and playgrounds was recently performed by the Board. She stated that one of the biggest concerns is that dogs are off leash outside of the ball field area. She doesn't believe dog owners should impose upon a neighborhood and believes it to be a health hazard.

Jeff Thomas – 407 Franklin Ave. – Speaking on behalf of several residents. He dispels the negative perception of Wilkinsburg. He sees the dog park as an asset in improving the image of Wilkinsburg. He believes meaningful regulation will help make this work for both sides. He supports licensing. He was not aware of the recent neighborhood clean-up of the park.

Art Hicks – 571 Princeton Blvd. – Stated he is a long-time resident of Wilkinsburg and a graduate of Wilkinsburg High School. He commented that he does not believe that Wilkinsburg can afford a dog park. He commented on the difficulty in getting basic improvements made to infrastructure in the Borough.

Ruth Kittner – 1023 Mifflin Ave. – Stated she supports a multi-purpose use of Whitney Field. Neighbors try to police the area but need rules which are enforceable. She has seen the park improved in the years that it has been used as an off leash area. She commented that there are more pressing problems to address in the Borough and that the park does help people get to know their neighbors and builds a sense of community.

Marit Aagaart – 427 Center St. – Commented that the dog park is a point of pride for the community. She stated that she has been using Frick Park which is not a short distance from her home. She commented that she would like to find a way to make the dog park work.

John Williams – 465 Biddle Ave. #3 – Stated he has been a homeowner in Wilkinsburg since 1999 and supports a dog park.

Kate Luxemburg 432 Rebecca Ave. – Commented that she owns two dogs and that they needed off leash time when they were younger to improve their disposition. She suggested looking at other locations for an off leash area and commented that it should be self-supporting and an asset which is promoted.

Jeff Lovett – 427 Center St. – Commented that he directed his search for a home in Wilkinsburg around Whitney Park. He believes that dog walking builds a sense of community and that reasonable regulation can resolve the issues.

Amisha Grosch- 317 Pitt St. – Stated she has lived in the area for about three years. She has been battling breast cancer for seven months. She has two dogs and is not permitted to drive and cannot walk her dogs. She stated that her neighbors have been taking her dogs to Whitney Park for her and they are tired when they return home which provides her time to spend with her partner. She believes regulations for the off leash area would help and is willing to help with clean ups and contribute financially.

Jennifer Wertz – Commented that realtors list the off leash area as a neighborhood feature and it is considered an amenity in a community.

President Cohn commented that all of the feedback received is valid and he would like to find a way to keep the off leash area as an amenity without it being, or being less of, a nuisance. The manner in which the area is currently utilized is not working and commercial use is not appropriate for this public space. He believes Council has some ideas to discuss.

Ms. Moore sympathizes with everyone and knows of a lot of owners that do not clean up after their dogs when they are being walked on a leash on streets. The Borough is stressed by many challenges. She announced a community conversation regarding the Wilkesburg School District which will be held at Hosanna House on May 30, 2013 from 6-8 p.m.

Ms. Goodman commented that she has used the off leash area at Whitney Park and believes she is a responsible dog owner. She stated that this is a difficult decision and Council needs to determine if it's possible to retain the amenity and reduce/eliminate the nuisance.

Ms. McCarthy-Johnson stated she has mixed feelings about the park being used for off leash purposes. There are a lot of issues facing the Borough and there are other ways to meet neighbors and to get involved in the community. There are children that have nowhere to play. There is a need to identify the legal issues and liabilities relating to the off leash use. She commented on the use of the space for a ball field. Ms. McCarthy-Johnson announced the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Concert to be held on May 24, 2013 at 7:00 p.m. Ticket price is \$10.00 for adults.

Ms. Moore left the meeting at approximately 8:30 PM.

President Cohn commented that most parks in the Borough are underutilized and that this park is being utilized and proposes that Council look at a plan which is affordable and workable. Ms. Law suggested the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board should review the matter. President Cohn stated that he is in receipt of a petition containing 176 signatures in support of off leash use in Whitney Park.

Mr. Lefebvre stated that he understands the concerns expressed and believes common ground can be reached. He stated that the park has been used for this purpose for a long time. He commented that parks are open from dawn until dusk and if people are in the parks outside of those hours, the police need to be called. Residents in that neighborhood have maintained the park for years and have made it what it is today. Ms. Marcinko provided suggested regulations for off leash use from the Borough's insurance carrier. Council should work with the Parks & Recreation Advisory Board to institute reasonable regulations which are enforceable. A permit system should be explored as well as limits to hours of use and number of dogs each person may be permitted to have in the off leash area at any one time.

Marty Freundt – Stated he is skeptical about instituting more regulations when the current regulations are not being observed. For those who stated that they were not aware of the semi-annual clean-up, he stated that it was posted on the fence at the park as well as other locations throughout the neighborhood.

Mike Milberger – Stated that he believes it is difficult to obtain adequate enforcement from the Police Department to enforce regulations for off leash use. He also stated that the Block Watch has helped with crime in the area.

Chief Coleman stated that the Police Department will enforce the regulations currently in effect.

Gibson Wertz – Suggested that the times for off leash use of the park could be 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.

ADJOURNMENT

Being no further business, President Cohn adjourned the meeting at approximately 8:45 P.M.

Jason Cohn, Council President