

MINUTES
TOWN OF GORHAM
ROBIE PARK MASTER PLAN STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING
Wednesday, September 6, 2023 – 6:00 p.m.
Gorham Municipal Center, Conference Room A

Committee Members:

Present: Michael Chabot, Katherine Garrard, Jacinda Wilson, Laurel Emersen, and Councilors Phillip Gagnon and Ronald Shepard.

Absent: Rob Delaney.

Also Present: Director of Community Development Thomas Poirier; Recreation Director Cynthia Hazelton; Caitlyn Aceto and Grace McNeil of Aceto Landscape Architects, and six members of the public – Brianne Heckman, Jacqueline Lortie, Roger and Peggy Marchand, Chick Williams, and one additional member of the public – name unknown.

1. **Minutes of July 10, 2023 meeting**

A motion was MADE by Katherine Garrard, SECONDED by Councilor Shepard and voted to accept the minutes of July 10, 2023 meeting. Unanimous vote.

2. **Current Business:**

A. Review Feedback from Charrette.

Caitlyn Aceto of Aceto Landscape Architects shared that additional outreach was done after the agenda for this meeting had been made. She said that their staff attended a Summer Thursday food truck event, and they received a lot of the same feedback at that event as they had received at the charrette.

Ms. Aceto said that they also attended a Gorham Farmer’s Market event that Saturday at which they received the same feedback including how passionate people were about the park just from people walking by, which was very powerful.

B. Discuss Feedback with Steering Committee.

Ms. Aceto said they have taken all of the feedback and created “wants” and “don’t want” lists, as well as diagrams. Regarding the lines that were drawn, she said they can blend and bleed and help to create spacial organization and a framework for the master plan. After, she said they will share a lot of images to get the committee’s creative juices flowing.

C. Present Initial Concept Diagrams Based on Charrette.

Regarding the diagrams, Ms. Aceto said they narrowed them down to a few different zones. In the green ballfield zone, she said feedback included there being an existing softball field there, a relocated basketball court, a permanent bathroom, water fountain, trash cans and snack shack. She noted those things don't have to go in that zone, but these comments were heard from people that may potentially fit well within that zone.

Regarding the yellow meadow zone, they heard a lot of people say they want it to be more like a meadow with possible trail connections, native perennials, seating, nature plays, as well as sensory elements.

In the red play area zone, Ms. Aceto said feedback included upgraded and additional play equipment, a splash pad, and comfortable seating.

In the community space, Ms. Aceto said feedback included a community garden, bee hives, pavilion, picnic and game tables, and chalk wall or some sort of art element.

In the welcome area, feedback included educational signage to talk about the history of the park, bike racks, signage, a new path for walking through the existing woods, additional native plantings, shrubs, and interpretive signage about the plants.

Grace McNeil of Aceto Landscape Architects then shared four program diagrams to help illustrate the elements suggested from feedback in the different spaces, with program A reflecting the existing ball field in the same space, a meadow area taking up the open space below the ball field, keeping the existing woods on the northern eastern part of the park, and having a welcome area where the current park sign is. She added this program keeps a lot the existing elements at the park and upgrades them.

Ms. McNeil then shared program B, which is similar since they don't want to change the park too much based on community feedback. She said this program reflects an extended play area to be a bit larger based on feedback, and a larger community space and welcome area to create a simple cut-through between the high school and Municipal Center.

In program C, Ms. McNeil shared that they added a lot more woods, still having a meadow concept and keeping a play area, although the meadow has more play elements. She added that the welcome area would be near where it already kind of exists, and the play area and community space would be stacked.

In program D, Ms. McNeil said that is similar to program A, but with more community space. She said some feedback was to have some farmer's market space or gathering space.

Regarding the strip of community space under program B, Mrs. Garrard asked how that will dovetail with the existing paved pathways to which Ms. McNeil said we still have the existing pathway, which would just be straightened out a bit with the community elements off of the path.

Ms. Aceto said there could be eddies with shelter off of it or more of a central plaza with a path, making it more than just a path.

Regarding program C in the meadow, resident Brianne Heckman asked if the Aceto representatives were thinking of a playground for children or something educational where it would describe a native species to which Ms. McNeil said it would be less of there being a play scape in the meadow and more of little nature play pieces off the trail.

A member of the public (name unknown) asked if the different areas will flow into each other or if there will be some kind of casual buffer between them to which Ms. McNeil said they will flow into each other.

D. Present Precedents.

Ms. McNeil then reviewed program options in the form of imagery she referred to as precedents.

E. Feedback from Steering Committee.

Regarding a snack shack, Committee Vice Chair Michael Chabot asked if the snack shack gets a lot of use at Robie Park to which Recreation Director Cynthia Hazelton said it gets zero use.

Mr. Chabot asked if its non-use was a result of the facility being not up to par or something entirely different to which Mrs. Hazelton said she would guess that from the times that the Recreation department survived entirely on the snack shack revenues to today, it is not needed as revenue today. She said that the high school ran it four or five times and they had prepackaged goods and drinks. She noted that there is no water and or sewer, which may have started the trend away from it being used. She said the shack at Little Falls is beginning to be used again. With all that was said, Mrs. Hazelton said the lack of use would be likely due to the lack of conveniences like sewer and water.

Mrs. Garrard asked what kind of teams play there to which Mrs. Hazelton said Robie has varsity and junior varsity softball, Recreation's adult co-ed league, little league softball in the spring, summer and fall, as well as Recreation's flag football program and kiddy kickers soccer. She added that Recreation has also hosted snow-pitch softball tournaments and ice sculptures activities there.

Councilor Shepard asked what kind of activities support the snack shack.

Mrs. Hazelton said that groups would need to buy into a commitment for the shack to be managed.

School Committee member Stewart McCallister said it may be an item for another group outside of this committee, but maybe instead of a snack shack - space for a food truck or vendor could be provided so that if we have an event, we would have the space available for a vendor to easily set up; this would make it so that the Town would not have to commit to a facility or building. He further said that if it doesn't work, we don't have to keep doing it.

Ms. Aceto said that where the feedback was from all ages, there were children at the charrette that said they wanted a snack shack.

Ms. McNeil said that another option and precedent would be a more permanent bathroom. She said they know the space is small and they don't want to take a lot of room with buildings.

Ms. McNeil said that a lot of people said they did not like the current location of the basketball court and wanted to see it moved closer to the baseball field with the old space becoming a space for community art.

Ms. McNeil then referred to a precedent of nature play elements within the meadow space.

Ms. Heckman asked if the nature play pieces were man-made to which Ms. McNeil said they can be, and Ms. Aceto said that it also depends on the committee's approach to it.

Regarding the play area, Ms. McNeil said the precedent provided reflects good traditional play equipment.

A brief discussion ensued regarding the turf material.

Mrs. Garrard asked if the play equipment would be ADA-accessible to which Mrs. Hazelton said the precedent shown was not. She said it was a great-looking play structure, but she said someone could not wheel themselves on the turf and transfer onto the equipment. She also explained that the precedent reflects a six to 12-year old playground with much bigger and higher elements.

A member of the public (name unknown), asked if there was any thought of swings for adults to which Ms. McNeil said – yes.

Councilor Gagnon said that he sent to Director of Community Development Tom Poirier a nice canopied area in Vermont with adult exercise equipment including an all-weather elliptical and other things like that.

Councilor Shepard said the precedent shown reminded him of the play area at the Desert of Maine.

Ms. McNeil continued to review additional precedents.

Regarding a splash pad, Ms. Heckman asked if it would be on a timer. She said that there are some sprinklers that are still running when it is pouring rain outside.

Ms. Aceto said that there could be a button to push that would set a timer.

A brief discussion ensued regarding the existing community garden in which Mr. Chabot commented that the community-use precedent shown appeared kind of tight to him.

Regarding the various elements, Ms. Aceto said an important consideration should be the shared maintenance by the Town, School and other groups to keep the elements effective. She further said that if the committee does not think it is feasible to maintain a story walk or other certain elements, she encouraged members to voice their opinions.

Mrs. Hazelton said the Town has two great model story walks, one at Cherry Hill Farm in which Shaw Brothers Construction was instrumental in making it possible.

Resident Chick Williams commented that authors like Tonya Shevenell are trying to stay more locally relevant by attending the farmers market. He said maybe as a way to help with their branding and marketing, they could maintain certain elements in the park.

Roger Marchand said that if we look at the bike trail at the park, the pollinator garden, and the paved area by the library, we have a large area that could flow into each area to make an extension of the Robie Park area.

Mr. Chabot commented that he sees paths like that of Back Cove in Portland that are stone dust and packed powder. He asked if the path at Robie Park is wide enough, would that kind of material be acceptable as long as it's level to which Ms. Aceto said that if it is stabilized and level – yes.

Mrs. Hazelton said that material would not be recommended on a slope with more than a five percent grade, but on a level path - that is a good material.

Ms. Aceto suggested play elements in the meadow area as they would help to entertain families with young children if they were visiting while also ordering from a food truck.

Councilor Shepard suggested incorporating connectors on the paths.

A brief discussion ensued in which Mr. Chabot commented that there was already an existing network of little paths in place that were less defined.

Regarding outreach, Mr. Poirier asked if the feedback received was mainly in favor of a basketball court. He said he asks, because pickleball is such a popular sport right now to which Ms. McNeil said they received no feedback in support of a pickleball court, and that it was mostly about the basketball court and that it needed to be refinished.

Ms. Heckman said that Standish has mobile pickleball nets and equipment at their tennis courts.

Councilor Gagnon said the mobile ones at Narragansett are pretty nice.

Ms. McNeil said that a consideration is that pickleball can be very loud and this park is small and close to a lot a residences, which could be very irritating.

Ms. Heckman commented that pickleball is not any louder than basketball courts, because her house is across from basketball courts.

Ms. Aceto said that if the basketball court has a nice surface on it, there are ways to have temporary pickleball nets on it.

Mr. Chabot said that the buffer that was reflected in one of the programs near the high school side would be great and would help muffle some of the sound.

Mr. Williams asked with regard to program C, if the buffer would help drown out some of the noise toward the neighborhood to which Ms. Aceto and Ms. McNeil said – yes.

Mr. Williams said that would also connect the play meadow area to the designated play area.

Regarding the basketball court, Councilor Gagnon said he would move it more toward the corner/back end of the lot away from people since the existing meadow would be in the other corner area.

Ms. Aceto said the good thing about that configuration is that the open space or meadow area could be used as flex or gathering space or anything else.

Regarding option C, Mr. Williams asked if different tree species like oak should be incorporated in the wooded area to help the meadow to which Ms. McNeil said – possibly. She clarified that when they refer to existing woods, they are not talking exclusively about pine, but just native species like oak, maple and pine.

A resident (name unknown) said that when the neighbors and community went into shock when the pines came down, one of the reasons was that it was so hot in the park with the western sun, which also impacted where people would be sitting outside for community concerts on Tuesday nights because the area was no longer shaded from the sun. She recommended that it would be an important area to have shade trees if not pine trees. She added that they are just now figuring out that oak trees are a wonderful thing to have to help other species so that might be something to think about since you don't worry about shade in the winter. She also thanked the Aceto staff for their presentation of pictures.

Mr. Marchand said that there is a bee hive at the Baxter Museum that has been there for years with honey bees that pollinate all around.

Ms. McNeil said that the high school has a bee club as well.

Regarding the meadow and play elements, Mrs. Marchand asked if Aceto staff would put a play area throughout the meadow while there would be plantings of perennials throughout. She asked how we would keep younger children from trampling through the plants considering how expensive they can be.

Ms. McNeil said that they could start out by making pathways to those play elements, which might help kids not go through the meadow, although regardless if there are play elements in the meadow or not, kids are going to run through it.

Ms. Aceto suggested that where there may be balancing equipment, maybe the plantings be more hardy along a play element to direct children where we want them to go so they can still play.

Mr. McCallister suggested also incorporating native wildflowers so you don't have the same plant come back and it kind of regenerates on its own by seeding the areas around it. He added that whatever we do for a meadow, it should be perceived as having purpose and intent, and not that we are lazy and don't want to mow it.

Councilor Gagnon is concerned with the art elements and specifically how it would be displayed like in the Old Port on Fore Street. He said they put metallic waves that look almost like buzz saws and planted ornamental grass in between so that when it grew up, it started to look nice and then became an eye sore very quickly. He added that when he looks at stuff like this, he wants a simplicity to it so that when plants start to go to seed, people don't start to ask why things look un-kept. He would also like a rearrangement of some of the places where there is a defined activity, but he does not know if just having one meadow in the area would be more beneficial, or having it along a route like Councilor Shepard had said where people would be walking and would see the flowers and plants.

Ms. McNeil said that interpretive signage could be installed that explained the grow process of a meadow.

A resident (name unknown) said that a problem for folks in the village is that we have a terrible white tail deer problem, so having a place where the deer may come and having tall grass where children will run through is concerning.

Councilor Gagnon said that the flow of the park and walkability was among the feedback that he has heard from people, as well as enjoying the nature that is within the area. He said he likes how the programs are blocked out, but he thinks that some stuff should be moved or shuffled like having a bigger community space and making the play area shorter with the community space around it so that you can get a nice traversing walkway or something like that. He doesn't necessarily want to be confined to the bubbles in the proposed program designs as it would make it a little easier to maintain.

Ms. Aceto said that she believes what she is hearing is to make the areas very strategic and have edges.

For the group, Councilor Gagnon said to maybe come up with an idea of where we would like some of these bubbles to be concentrated so that they have an idea of how they can design the flow of the walkways.

Ms. Aceto said the next steps will be taking the bubbles and drawing circulation paths where the elements are.

Councilor Gagnon asked if the committee should also focus on themes.

Regarding the playgrounds, Jacinda Wilson said that with her experience on the conservation side, she did like seeing the wood and metal materials.

Mrs. Hazelton commented that the Town's insurance company will determine that for us. She said there are amazing products out there, and that a natural log gets full of bees and termites, but there is a polymer that stands up to New England weather and fits that bill.

Mrs. Garrard suggested a natural look, but not necessarily a natural material.

A discussion ensued regarding playground materials used around the U.S.

Mr. Chabot asked Mrs. Hazelton if there are other large-scale events that the group should be thinking about aside from the tree-lighting ceremony to which she said that the sky is the limit once/if the park is enhanced with the new amenities the group has been considering. She added that she hasn't seen a thread yet in the program options that says to her that Robie Park will be a destination spot that will never become a parking lot.

Ms. Aceto said that they have developed the diagrams based off of what they have heard and haven't imposed any grand ideas, but the next step will to be actually draw three alternatives. She said if the group wants to see an alternative that is like a wildcard, they can draw that, too.

Mr. Chabot said that considering the information that has been provided to the Aceto team, he is not hearing that there is an issue with parking.

Mr. Marchand said there is always an issue with parking at the high school.

Mr. McCallister said that there is not necessarily plenty of parking spots at the high school, but he does not know that there is a solution at Robie Park that the School would want to go looking for. He added that he doesn't know that there is a way to balance that with what the community wants. He believes that it is part of the group's responsibility to create some sort of a destination park.

A resident (name unknown) said that for many of the residents, Robie Park has always been a destination that you didn't need a car to get to, so they have wanted to keep it simple and not have a lot of parking spaces. She added that her hope is to take it and unveil as a gem that has always been here, and that the Town Council, community and other towns will see the value in it.

A discussion ensued about the ultimate vision of the park in which Councilor Gagnon said he has heard that a lot of the activities at the park are from April to November, so there isn't a lot of winter activity. He said people with small children use the park as well as older citizens, so it is either that we are catering to the neighborhood and those demographics, or we are looking to draw new people to it is what he is hearing. He said we need to start congealing a consensus.

Mr. Chabot said he concurs with Mrs. Hazelton that he is always going to be concerned about the future use of the park.

Councilor Gagnon said he hears what Mr. Chabot is saying, but he can't be designing the future use of the park out of fear, but rather because of the community's feedback and use. He said that if a meadow in the proposed area is not ideal, he agrees with Mr. Chabot and would lean toward moving the basketball court there.

Ms. Aceto said it sounds like multiple people want to see the basketball courts moved to the location marked as the meadow, so they can make sure an alternative definitely has basketball there.

Ms. Wilson said that with previous discussions, maybe moving the court as far away from the residential areas as possible would be great, if there is going to be a basketball court in the plan.

Mr. McCallister asked that if we are going to be doing the work, does one court already fit the need for the area instead of having a second basketball court. He asked if that would impede too much on the desire to have increased paved area.

Ms. Wilson said the trees around the court could provide shade and serve as a buffer.

Councilor Gagnon suggested doing the same with a pavilion by angling it to take the noise away from the neighborhood.

Ms. Aceto said a nice thing about a pavilion would be that it could create partnerships with the co-op being there and other groups, opening up the community to really vest in this space.

Mr. Marchand said he lives on South Street and does not know how much basketball goes on to which the attendees responded – everyday.

Mr. Williams said there are a lot of families that walk to or utilize those courts, not necessarily just for basketball, but for a surface to play on every night.

Ms. Wilson said she liked the idea of a u-shaped space to create a kind of community space around the playground, which could help create more of a buffer so it is not as loud.

Councilor Gagnon asked if there will be an arborist for some of these trees.

Mr. Poirier said that could be a recommendation that could come from this committee.

Councilor Gagnon would like to have an arborist go through and that this would be part of the process when we are looking at some of these designs. He further said that if we know that some of the trees are going to go, a path could be made around where it was and we'd have to plant a new tree.

F. Identify Next Steps.

Mr. Poirier said the next steps would be to get the plan done, then the plans would go to the engineers and arborist for all the details to get worked out, then the Planning Board would review.

A resident (name unknown) asked if we then have to try to get funding to which Mr. Poirier said that we have some funding that was allocated to the park that will probably not fund the whole thing, but it should provide a good first step.

Ms. Aceto said that the next step is that the bubbles will turn into actual lines with circulation programmed, with little play structures drawn on the plan, and they will bring to the committee three concepts based on what they have heard.

Regarding a schedule, Ms. Aceto said they were thinking maybe the first week in October for a meeting to review the three concepts at which time the group will then decide which concept is liked the most that Aceto staff can then modify based on feedback that will then be widdled down to one plan that can then be adopted by the Town Council.

The committee agreed to meet again on Wednesday, October 4, 2023 at 6pm in Conference Room A.

Ms. Aceto said the goal is to try to wrap this effort up by end of December or early January 2024, so that the group can think about any initiatives that may come out of this process.

3. **Adjournment**

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned. Time of adjournment: 7:17pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Jessica Hughes, Executive Assistant

Steering Committee Vision Statement:

“Robie Park will be a vibrant and inclusive community space where people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds can come together to connect with nature, engage in physical activity, and build relationships with one another. We envision a park that is accessible, sage, and welcoming, featuring green spaces, recreational amenities, and educational opportunities that promote health, wellness, and environmental stewardship.”