

Canfield, Ohio
March 14, 2016

The Regular Meeting of the Board of Park Commissioners of Mill Creek MetroParks was held on Monday, March 14, 2016, at the MetroParks Farm. President John Ragan welcomed guests and staff.

The meeting opened at 6 p.m. with recitation of The Pledge of Allegiance. Roll Call was as follows: Germaine Bennett, present, Bob Durick, present; John Ragan, present; Scott Schulick, present; and Mike Senchak, present.

John Ragan presented the Minutes of the Meeting of February 8, 2016, and asked that they be approved. Scott Schulick motioned they be approved. The motion was seconded by Mike Senchak and passed, and the vote taken resulted as follows:

Voting Aye: Bennett, Durick, Ragan, Schulick, Senchak
Voting Nay: None

Kevin Smith, Treasurer/Administrative Services Director, presented the Treasurer's Report. After discussion, Mike Senchak moved, the funds having been certified as on hand and duly appropriated, that disbursements #69826 - #70044 be approved. The motion was seconded by Germaine Bennett and the vote taken resulted as follows:

Voting Aye: Bennett, Durick, Ragan, Schulick, Senchak
Voting Nay: None

Justin Rogers, Planning Manager presented the Bid Tabulations for the Reconstruction of Lanterman's Mill Parking Lot project. Scott Schulick motioned that the bid of Foust Construction be accepted, it being the lowest and best bid. The motion was seconded by Bob Durick and the vote taken resulted as follows:

Voting Aye: Bennett, Durick, Ragan, Schulick, Senchak
Voting Nay: None

Carol Vigorito, Recreation and Education Director, presented the following special event requests for approval:

- a. Request of Youngstown Youth Flag Football Association to hold their games, and sell concessions, in the Wick Recreation Area Sundays April 10 - May 22, 2016.
- b. Request of Vertical Runners to hold a Fundraiser on Saturday, May 21, 2016, on trails throughout the MetroParks.
- c. Request of Salvation Army to hold a family bike ride on the MetroParks Bikeway on Saturday, June 25, 2016.
- d. Request of Vertical Runners to hold a Fundraiser on Sunday, August 14, 2016, on trails throughout the MetroParks
- e. Request of Vertical Runner to hold a Fundraiser on Sunday, December 4, 2016, on trails throughout the MetroParks.

After discussion, Germaine Bennett motioned that the requests be approved. The motion was seconded by Bob Durick and the vote taken resulted as follows:

Voting Aye: Bennett, Durick, Ragan, Schulick, Senchak
Voting Nay: None

Aaron Young, Executive Director, mentioned his open letter to Park supporters, recently posted on the MetroParks Facebook page, is available on the MetroParks website, and was provided to the commissioners.

Aaron congratulated Randy Campana for successfully completing the 14-month Certified Law Enforcement Executive (CLEE) program

Aaron gave a presentation “2016 Plan: Let’s Move Forward”

John Ragan opened up discussion about changing the park’s hours of operation to 9 p.m. instead of “dark” or “sunset”. After discussion, the Board asked that more information be brought to the next Board meeting.

Commissioners Comments:

John Ragan – Expressed that he supports Aaron’s reorganization plan, that reinstatement of the employees whose positions were eliminated will not happen, and that he had hoped the changes had been made with more sensitivity and better communication.

Bob Durick – Welcomed and thanked first-time attendees of the Board meeting, and invited them to come to every meeting. He spoke about the many angry and misinformed emails he received that had a wide variety of false information. He read an email from YSU President, Jim Tressel, in support of the MetroParks.

Germaine Bennett – She has read all of the emails she received, demanding that Aaron and the Board step down due to the recent reorganization; she would do so if Judge Rusu asked. She expressed her surprise and distress about how the position eliminations were handled. She was understanding of the frustration and anger about the elimination of Keith Kaiser’s, Ray Novotny’s, and others positions, and the subsequent resignation of staff and volunteers. She asked that volunteers continue to serve for the betterment of the MetroParks, because their absence would only hurt children and their families.

Mike Senchak – Conveyed that he has read all of the messages (61) that he received in the past few weeks. 3-4 comments were positive, 3-4 were extremely personal attacks, and the remainder shared common themes: Aaron must go, staff reinstated, manner in which staff were let go, trapping, mission statement, capital improvements, transparency, trails, Fellows Riverside Gardens, Mill Creek Golf Course, and that the park should not be run like a business. Mike thanked all of the MetroParks employees, said that Board and leadership values collaborative relationships in the community. Suggested that we focus on the future.

Scott Schulick – submitted these remarks for the official record:

REMARKS-Scott R. Schulick
MILL CREEK PARK BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS MEETING
MARCH 14, 2016

I rarely offer comments during “Commissioner’s Time,” but tonight I feel compelled to do so.

Mill Creek Park is a place of common ground for all of us who live in the Mahoning Valley. For me, growing up and living adjacent to the park, it is fond memories of: school picnics, pedal boats, sledding, learning to ice skate, running through sprinklers, feeding goldfish, and hiking the gorge. It is regular visits to the Rose Garden, Lily Pond, Daffodil Hill and of course, Lanterman’s Mill.

I’ve watched, like so many of you, the many disappointments in the management of the park over the past few years. That’s the reason why I became interested in serving as a Commissioner and was fortunate to be appointed to this board in 2015. At that time, I swore to be a steward of our region’s most precious natural resource and I am committed to doing so, for as long as I have the pleasure of serving. I’m sharing this with you because Mill Creek Park provides a sense of place and purpose. It is where we go when we are feeling good, and also when we need to be re-charged.

In my first year as a Commissioner, I’ve come to appreciate more than the overwhelming, but mere, natural beauty of the park. I’ve learned what it takes to run a park system comprising over 4,400 acres. It takes people—people like you and me, but especially the administrative staff and employees stationed throughout the park on a daily basis. I’ve watched thoughtful, beloved employees dedicated to furthering the mission of the park. I’ve also seen grave inefficiencies for an organization the size and scope of Mill Creek Park that have the potential to threaten the long-term sustainability of the park. Looking back at my first year as a commissioner, I offer the following:

- We have a pristine natural landscape, with well-manicured trails and gardens, providing recreational opportunities reflecting a diversity of options for park users. Behind the obvious, it an organization with elements of dysfunction.
- We have a dedicated staff, volunteers and community supporters, despite years of leadership instability
- We’ve had remarkable public relations missteps, and the aftermath of such failures often leading to misperceptions and personal attacks
- We have dedicated support groups, but at times there are competing interests and agendas
- We have a fledgling foundation and fund development operation, recently re-organized and under new leadership.
- We had a levy campaign for which there had been no planning until about three months before it was required to be placed on the ballot
- We have a renowned golf course that had been losing money for well over a decade, maybe more, until last year
- We have board bylaws which are antiquated, few governance practices in place, minimal board policies, and no board committee structure

- We have an outmoded budget process whereby the budget for the current year is not even adopted until well into the first quarter of that same new year
- We have a deferred maintenance schedule a mile long
- We have polluted lakes, due to issues beyond our control requiring the cooperation of several governmental entities, whom the park MUST convene to resolve. Together, we've all watched the prophetic words of Volney Rogers be realized as they relate to issues in our regional watershed—our shared responsibility.

That's just to name a few obvious items. To say the list is overwhelming doesn't begin to describe the magnitude of the situation we face. At times, I've even doubted if any of it can be reversed, or what I can offer as one commissioner. "Kicking the can down the road" is the way I describe what I observe has been happening within the MetroParks for a very long time. And at some point, action is required. For those present tonight, I'm sure that is your main concern. It's mine, too. As you can surmise from the earlier presentation, I hope you are re-assured that thoughtful consideration was given to the re-structuring staff, with the goal of preserving programs and facilities. As one of three commissioners appointed during the past fourteen months—a young board in terms of years of service who is also just getting to know one another--please know we have been trying to address the competing challenges facing the park. I ask that you please be patient as the park's challenges were not created overnight, nor will they will not be resolved overnight.

I want you to know that your voices are being heard and will continue to be heard this evening. I know that many of you feel that your trust has been violated, but I want you to understand that I am personally committed to restoring your confidence in the leadership of the MetroParks and will do all I can to ensure it happens—soon. Perhaps the advice received from human resource professionals and outside counsel may be considered by some as misguided. It likely was, and as a commissioner, I am sorry. Perhaps this situation was not communicated as effectively as it could have been, and perhaps not everyone truly realizes what the park faces long-term. Again, I offer my personal apology. The effects of inflation impact the park, just as they do for our households. Recall that the park's budget was reduced over \$300,000 over the past two years. Despite numerous public presentations during the strategic planning and levy planning processes, many may not have realized what it meant to keep the park sustainable, and that is indeed regrettable. Passing the levy never guaranteed that all of the park's challenges would be solved. In fact, the levy passed was a compromise to provide additional funds, but not all of the funds necessary to keep things status quo.

Some individuals have been looking for one to blame. There is no room for blame—only responsibility. And responsibility for these actions has been assumed by the executive director who has the authority to make management decisions; and by this body, whose role is to set policy, hire the executive director and allow him to hire staff and manage the park as appropriate. Please take a moment to keep this in perspective—the board is responsible for governance, the executive director for management. I personally apologize to those in the community who believe that we did not live up to your expectations. As a commissioner, I pledge to do better, and I will work tirelessly to ensure that is the case going forward. No one relishes in someone else's job loss, but I surely would not want to be a commissioner a few years hence, facing even

potentially deeper cuts to staff, programs or facilities. At that point the likely question would be, “why didn’t the executive director or the board take any action sooner?”

I hope you can see that I’m no different than all of you gathered here tonight. I share frustrations. While your motivations to attend this meeting are varied, I challenge you to remain engaged in the park not only when things aren’t going the way you like. There are plenty of seats left empty at our regular meetings. I anticipate that we will soon hear more feedback from those present, some likely positive, but mostly negative. And there will be some who simply won’t be able to accept any information presented or explanation offered. I challenge you to offer constructive solutions to the pressures that the park faces now and in the future.

We have a choice today. We can be mad. And it’s ok to be mad—for a while. We can disagree, but we shouldn’t be disagreeable. At some point soon, we need to move beyond our anger and turn that negative energy into a positive force for a renewed Metroparks system, if we are to succeed. The staff who assumes responsibility for many functions needs your support. To suggest that they are less competent than those who preceded them is a disingenuous assumption. Those who consider walking away from volunteer positions or other endeavors only hurt the park further. I’ve always believed that you create change from within, rather than from outside. I challenge you to renew your commitment for the park, as the park means different things to different people. For all of us, it is indeed our most sacred space, and most valuable community asset.

Mill Creek Park has survived those who would attack it for 125 years, in ways far more grave than an organizational restructuring. With your continued patronage, the park will survive for at least 125 more, so that more children like me, can run through the sprinklers, sled down the hills and spend many hours pondering what’s important in the quality of one’s life.

When I look out from this vantage point when our meetings are held in this place, I see two eyes staring back at me. Those are the eyes of the man in the photo on the back wall, whose name adorns this very hall—the late Kenneth F. McMahon. The McMahons were and are good friends of the Schulicks, and Ken and Mary McMahon, both park commissioners, were community leaders I held in high regard. When I accepted this position, I knew that Mr. McMahon would be watching me, and watching over his beloved park.

I sincerely thank you in advance for being present this evening, the thoughts you will offer and your genuine love for the park. Mill Creek Park will continue to be “common ground” for all of us. It is an honor to serve you, the taxpayers of Mahoning County, as a member of the Mill Creek MetroParks Board of Commissioners.

I submit these remarks for the official record.

Thank you.

Public Comments

Andy Detesco, president of the Mill Creek Park Foundation, was the moderator and timekeeper for the public comment session.

Judy Peyko – Expressed her disagreement with several things in Aaron's presentation, the purchase of vehicles in 2015 & 2016, our claim of financial difficulties, and animal trapping in the MetroParks. She asked for Aaron's resignation and reinstatement of the employees who were let go.

Representative John Boccieri – Stated that he has received a lot of emails about recent actions of the Board and Executive Director to reorganize the staff structure, with position eliminations. He expressed that he and his wife were very upset with how it all happened. He feels the employees should be reinstated. He is researching on how MetroParks Boards are assigned; legislation is forthcoming. Asked that everyone be respectful and polite, and that the Board is not paid.

Richard Scarsella – President of the William Holmes McGuffey Historical Society expressed that the current park board did not create the dilemma we are now in. That these are good people that had to make difficult decisions. Suggested a citizen advisory board be created. Asked that the community be open-minded, step up with solutions, and find a win-win solution for everyone.

Sean Logan – Formerly with ODNR, he spoke regarding the high quality and contents of the developer of the MetroParks' Strategic Plan, Leon Younger of Pros Consulting. He stated that when he was with ODNR, he would express to his staff that the positions they hold with ODNR weren't meant to be comfortable. He commended the Board for their apology to the public, was impressed with Aaron's analytics, and appreciates the Board's volunteer work for the MetroParks. He asked that those in attendance do not sign the petition to repeal the MetroParks Levy.

Elsie Dursi – Expressed displeasure with the recent staff eliminations, the alienation of the constituency, called for removal of Aaron, and asked why the long-term, loyal employees weren't let in on the plan. She spoke regarding the caliber of Ray Novotny vs that of Aaron's.

Katie Shipka – Has volunteered with the park 31 years, and coordinator of the volunteers at the Ford Center for 20 years. She expressed her concern with the impact of losing valuable volunteers, and that the volunteers felt that since Aaron doesn't value their staff, he must feel the volunteers have no value either. Stated that dedicated employees have left a wonderful legacy, vs. what Aaron's legacy will be.

Carl Antonelli – Spoke about why he and his wife became volunteers, and that they both have resigned due to the way the staff has been treated. He spoke highly of Ray Novotny, and that it was through his efforts that Volney Rogers got inducted into the hall of fame.

Ray Novotny – Gave an impassioned speech about wanting to work for the MetroParks since he was a child. That for decades the park has had a full-time naturalist. Since he was let go, he has been working with Megan (MetroParks HR Director), and Aaron about the possibility of earning the title of "Naturalist Emeritus". This possibility came to an end when the park's attorneys rejected his plan. He stated powerfully that he does want to be Naturalist Emeritus, that he wants to teach the new part-time staff, and asked that the Board listen to everything that is said here tonight.

Eric Clark – Expressed that the cost of the way the staff eliminations took place far outweighs the benefits, and the foundation of the Park has been lost.

Dave Deibel (spoke for he and his wife) – YSU trustee. Did not agree that Scott Schulick should have apologized, because the park is finally doing something responsible, for everyone's benefit.

Glenn Orr – not present

John Pardee – Expressed concern about loss of employees, loss of volunteers, loss of programming, and asked why the Board didn't include enough in the levy to pay for capital improvements. He felt as if the Board has been deceptive. He questioned why the employees were dismissed with police escort. He called for the removal of Aaron, reinstatement of the employees, and to invite the volunteers to return.

Karen Meyers – not present

Karen Wright – Felt that it was unethical to fire employees from the top down, and that because of that she cannot continue to volunteer. She felt the numbers didn't add up, asked how many grants would have been done by those fired, and if the Friends of Fellows Riverside Gardens have indicated that they would reduce fundraising. Suggest that at least one member of the board be a naturalist or environmentalist.

Bill Adams – Expressed his concern that Aaron's presentation tonight was wrong on the funding and percentages, and that the numbers don't add up. Referred to the MetroParks Strategic Plan and questioned that why, if the MetroParks is in sound financial shape, and that the plan suggests that the operational and leadership management of the Horticulture Director should be extended to staff throughout the MetroParks, that that position and others would be eliminated.

Julia Davis – Recommended: 1. Do not hire a PR firm to redeem ourselves, 2. Fire Aaron, and 3. Offer the Executive Director job to Keith Kaiser.

Sallie Dutton – Has helped raise funds and supported the MetroParks for years. Felt the way employees were removed was offensive. Suggested that Aaron be replaced and all employees jobs restored.

Art Rothenberg – Questioned the quality and quantity of future educational services, quality of horticultural displays, lack of a full-time naturalist, capital improvements vs capital expenditures, and canopy walk funding. Suggested the levy be renewed every 3 years instead of 15 years to make the board more responsive.

Sammie Winick – Disagreed that programs and services would not be diminished. Said that there has always been staffing issues at the Gardens, for decades. Listed the several programs at the Gardens have already been eliminated and/or asked to look for a new venue: Master Gardener program, Winter Tea, On the Terrace at 5, Family Garden programs, Plant the Seed to Read. Stated that Keith Kaiser's vision is what we see at the Gardens.

Jeff Harvey – Voiced concern about the authorizations for spending in the 2016 budget, that extra was cut that the Board has not approved, that the organizational chart isn't made, and why we couldn't find any money for one full-time naturalist. Questioned how the Gardens will operate. Stated that he attends MetroParks board meetings regularly and learns nothing, the communication is poor, and he will continue to request public records. This PR nightmare is the board's responsibility.

Bill Black – Showed concern about how the staff was treated during the recent reductions, and that the salaries were appallingly low. Questioned why employees would stick around with no raises since 2009, and the poor way they are treated. Suggested the Executive Director take a cut in pay.

Barbara Brothers – "etc."

Peggy Palma – Expressed her gratitude to Ray, Keith, and staff for their education of children. Asked if outdoor education is less of a priority? Stated that Mill Creek was the only county park in Ohio without a full-time naturalist.

Kathleen Berry – Noted that over 300 or more people were here tonight. Said that the crowd has been insulted for 1 ½ hours with damage control by the Executive Director and Commissioners. Asked that they take full responsibility for how the employees have been treated. Suggested that the employees should be reinstated and Aaron should resign.

Rosemary Thomas – Upset with the way the Keith, rangers, and other staff were let go. Felt that the rangers at the Gardens made everyone feel safe, but now, not so much.

Werner Lang – Called for Aaron to be fired, due to his arrogance, malfeasance, dishonesty, mistakes, and lies. He lied about programs being eliminated – the Master Gardener program is already eliminated – due to low participation, or was it due to lack of staffing? Cited MetroParks rules and regulations that Aaron has violated. Felt the Lily Pond was ruined by the improvements. Asked that Aaron be fired, and if the commissioners wouldn't, then they would be guilty of dereliction of duty. Suggested Keith Kaiser be hired as Executive Director.

Lucia Yurco – Spoke about some of Aaron's comments on Vindy Talk Radio recently. That he mentioned that employee morale was poor when he started, and she questioned how he thinks eliminating 13 positions would help employee morale, when performance was not an issue. Concerned that nature and horticulture programs will not be offered.

Robert Clyde – Expressed astonishment that the Board didn't know about the reorganization plan 3 months before the levy expired, that the plan was not shared openly, and that this is a big loss. Requested that the Board reconsider what was done.

Diana Murar – not present

Diana Shaheen – Conveyed that an apology doesn't hold water until amends are made. Rehire staff, let Aaron go.

Robert McGowan – yielded his time previously to Werner Lang.

Carl James – Learned at the Gardens that you don't damage the "roots". The roots of the park were Vickers, Whitehouse, Novotny, and Kaiser. Requested the personnel decisions made recently be reconsidered. Protect the roots.

Julius Bennett – not present

Gunther Lang – Concerned about the effect the staff members eliminated would have on the volunteer structure. The whole community has been alienated and antagonized, concerned about future donors, staff treatment, and public support. Felt that Aaron is blind, insensitive and incompetent. Yank Aaron.

Pearl Sinistro – Asked why the park was against wildlife and condones trapping. Reminded everyone about the "golden rule", and that maybe Aaron's job will be terminated.

Angie Bradian – From the Save the Wildlife in MCP Facebook group. Stated that the park is under the microscope for many reasons, trapping, irresponsibility with wildlife, killing – although legal, it's unethical, etc. Requested the park hire a wildlife specialist, not give Mr. Volpe a trapping permit, and move forward with a humane wildlife policy.

Chris Peyko – Remarked that James Brammer, head of Forestry was also let go, and asked about lawsuits if people in the park got hurt. Suggest Aaron be removed, and all employees reinstated.

Marge Napoli - Feels that saving money doesn't mean we can discharge staff.

Kathy Pannunzio – Expressed that she was not happy with the geese situation, trapping, terminations of long-term employees, wildlife policy, water quality, and what legacy we would be leaving to the children. Management needs changed. Urged board to take a public confidence vote.

Liz Ramsey – From Smith Township. Feels that the Commissioners have made an extreme change from Volney Rogers' vision. The Strategic Plan on our website said we would have a natural park, classes,

involvement with outlying communities. There are ways to save money besides firing staff. Make the golf course pay its own way. Get rid of the Horsepark that only Akron residents can use.

Daniel Bienko – Encourages the community to join him to pressure the board to help with cleanup of the waterways.

Pat Eddy – Can relate to the board and people affected by the recent position eliminations. She was in such a position at her job at one time. Expressed sadness about the volunteers saying they will quit – that only hurts the park. I give my full support to the Board.

Beth Haddle – Feels that Mill Creek Park is the crown jewel of the area, and is being harmed by poor decisions. United as a community, we need to continue the movement at the legislative level. Relationships have been strained with donors, volunteers, and staff. Fellows Riverside Gardens is a unique botanical garden that needs to be taken care of and preserved properly. Write to your legislators, change the levy, not eliminate it, boycott. Make them work for us – it's our park.

Karen Seidler – not present

Tracie Balentine – As an HR professional she was upset with the way the terminations were handled. Questioned why the board didn't ask how it was going to happen. Mill Creek Park is the heart of the community. Money doesn't add up, spending cuts should have been made, and staff cuts should have been last resort. Agreed that restructuring probably needed to take place and wants to believe that Aaron and the board care. Urged the board to make better decisions. Encouraged the audience to don't let decisions they disagree with keep them from the park we love.

Marsha Karzmer – Unhappy with the changes to the park over the past few years. Feels that the board doesn't listen to the public. She is outraged at the firings, feels Aaron should resign, and the board step aside. Quoted Bill Whitehouse about the deliberate attempt to eliminate vital nature and horticulture programs.

Barb Westerfield – Asked why the heart and soul of our community has been taken. Fire Aaron.

Suzi Beiersdorfer – Quoted Joni Mitchell song about paving paradise. Stressed that we need to pass this beautiful jewel onto future generations. Felt that 3 minutes was not enough to speak at the board meetings, and people don't attend because they are not listened to. We don't want the emphasis to be on technology or increased development. Ask Aaron to resign.

Eric Alleman – not present

Mike Roman – not present

Steve Davner – Believes that Aaron and the board are doing a fantastic job. Stated that the people in attendance tonight do not represent the whole county, and should not speak as if they are.

Bruce Neff – Commented that he really appreciates the park compared to other places in the country. Asked the board for a vote to reinstate staff that were let go recently.

John Ragan announced that the next Regular Board Meeting has been scheduled for Monday, April 11, 2016, at 6 p.m. at the MetroParks Farm.

Germaine Bennett moved the Board meet in Executive Session to discuss collective bargaining matters. Bob Durick seconded the motion, and the roll being called upon its adoption, the vote resulted as follows:

Germaine Bennett - Aye
Bob Durick - Aye
John Ragan - Aye

Scott Schulick - Aye
Mike Senchak - Aye

The motion was passed, and the Board met in Executive Session at 9:52 p.m.

Mike Senchak motioned to return to Regular Session. Bob Durick seconded the motion and the Board returned from Executive Session at 10:35 p.m. The vote taken resulted as follows:

Voting Aye: Bennett, Durick, Ragan, Schulick, Senchak
Voting Nay: None

There being no further business, Germaine Bennett moved to adjourn the meeting. Scott Schulick seconded the motion, and the vote taken resulted as follows:

Voting Aye: Bennett, Durick, Ragan, Schulick, Senchak
Voting Nay: None

The meeting adjourned at 10:36 p.m.