

**GEAUGA PARK DISTRICT BOARD
OF PARK COMMISSIONERS
BOARD MEETING MINUTES
September 16, 2024**

The regular meeting of the Geauga Park District Board was held September 16, 2024, at the Meyer Center, Big Creek Park. The meeting was called to order at 8:30 a.m. Commissioners Howard Bates, Ray Guarino, Frank Stein and Jolene Carnabuci were present. Mr. Les LaGatta was absent.

Mr. Oros called the meeting to order. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

| Park District Employees | GUESTS |
|--|---------------|
| John Oros, Executive Director | Todd Hicks |
| Matthew McCue, Deputy Director | |
| Dennis Sloan, Chief Ranger | |
| Robert York, Park Ranger | |
| Paul Pira, Park Biologist | |
| Matt Kneitel, Natural Resource Manager | |
| Lucas Beamer, IT Manager | |
| Dan McConnaughy, Park Planner | |
| Meredith McKeon, Park Planner | |
| Sandy Ward, Marketing Manager | |
| Christine Ward, HR Manager | |
| Jessica Alpers, Administrative Assistant | |

APPROVAL OF AGENDA/ADDENDUM ITEMS

Mr. Oros asked for a motion to approve the agenda. Mr. Bates made a motion to approve the agenda; Mr. Guarino seconded the motion. After a roll-call voice vote, the motion was approved.

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| Mr. LaGatta | Absent |
| Mr. Stein | Yes |
| Mr. Bates | Yes |
| Mr. Guarino | Yes |
| Ms. Carnabuci | Yes |

APPROVE OR AMEND MEETING MINUTES

Mr. Oros asked for a motion to approve last month’s meeting minutes. Mr. Bates made a motion to approve the meeting minutes from August 19, 2024, Mr. Guarino seconded the motion. After a roll-call voice vote, the motion was approved.

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| Mr. Stein | Yes |
| Mr. LaGatta | Absent |
| Mr. Bates | Yes |
| Mr. Guarino | Yes |
| Ms. Carnabuci | Yes |

PRESENTATION OF FINANCIAL STATEMENT – AUGUST FINANCE

Mr. Oros stated that for the month of August the General Fund had a beginning balance was \$5,515,423 with an ending balance of \$5,872,972. The Land Improvement Fund had a beginning balance of \$1,698,651 with an ending balance of \$1,617,388. Mr. Oros shared that all funds combined had an ending balance of \$7,490,360 Mr. Oros asked if there were any questions about the financial statement. No questions were asked.

PRESENTATION OF PAYMENT REPORT – AUGUST FINANCE

Mr. Oros asked if there were any questions about the payments made in August. Mr. Guarino asked about the payment for Microsoft 360, if it was a yearly fee. Mr. Lucas Beamer responded that it was the yearly license fee only, not upgrades to the software. Ms. Carnabuci asked where the Park District software was licensed through and Mr. Beamer stated MNJ Technology.

Mr. Oros asked if there were any additional questions about the payment report; no questions were asked.

OLD BUSINESS

Planning Update

Mr. Matt McCue shared the status of existing capital improvements with most of the projects at completion; construction crews are still at The West Woods working on trail improvements on the Gallo property and should finish up shortly and additional improvements at Orchard Hills which should be finished soon; Veterans Legacy Woods Coldwater stream restoration, working on three different tributaries, irrigation ponds and flood plain areas with construction ongoing with the project finishing by the end of the year. Mr. McCue shared pictures and maps of the stream restoration, highlighting the areas being worked on. Mr. Oros and Mr. McCue invited the commissioners to visit the property and tour the site; Ms. Carnabuci had already visited the site with Mr. Paul Pira. Mr. Oros stated additional photos and maps would be shared in the future as the restoration project continues.

NEW BUSINESS

Resolution 5-2024: 2024 Tax Amounts & Rates Certification (2025 Collection Year)

Mr. Oros requested the Commissioners accept the amounts and rates as determined by the Budget Commission, authorizing the necessary tax levies and certifying them to the county auditor. Mr. Oros shared there are 3 tax rate levy collections totaling 2.6 mil of \$6,741,988: .7 mil in the amount of \$996,642; .9 mil in the amount of \$2,510,190 and 1.0 mil for \$3,235,156

Mr. Oros asked for a motion to approve the resolution Mr. Guarino made a motion to approve; Ms. Carnabuci seconded the motion. After a roll-call voice vote, the motion was approved.

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| Mr. Bates | Yes |
| Mr. Guarino | Yes |
| Mr. LaGatta | Absent |
| Mr. Stein | Yes |
| Ms. Carnabuci | Yes |

2025 Capital Improvement Projects

Mr. McCue shared the capital improvement projects for 2025, master plans being worked on by Mr. Dan McConnaughy and Ms. Meredith McKeon along with budgets; between now and the end of the year, scheduling contractors to begin work next year.

Five parks will be worked on in 2025:

- Beartown Lakes: playground and shelter area improvements and lakeside boardwalk (\$450,000 project budget); this park is about 149 acres with the main feature is the 22-acre lake with 2.8 miles of trail with shelters, restrooms, playground, bocce court, tether ball and winter 'sledding' hill. The improvements include adding additional seating to the shelter and new roof, area with firepit, a new boardwalk along the lake, refurbishing the Accessible trails in this area, and a new nature-based playground.
- Big Creek Park: camping improvements and Tupelo Ponds (\$275,000 project budget). The project would include adding another camping treehouse, refurbishing lean-to roofs and refreshing the tent pads. At Tupelo Pond, adding a few platforms to the pond for fishing and adding a small 20x18 picnic shelter and asphaltting the parking lot.
- Maple Highlands Trail north terminus where it connects to Lake County Greenway Trail (\$50,000 budget) where it transitions to Lake County Geauga Park District will create a small area to pull over with a trailhead structure including maps along with redoing the signage.
- Frohring Meadows: The Planning & NRM Department is pursuing funding to expand the 2 existing wetlands along with improving the trails and boardwalks. The trails would connect to the existing trails from the wetlands with the boardwalk that will have a viewing area approximately 6 feet above the wetland in one area.

- Sunnybrook Preserve: asphalt improvement and resurfacing (\$70,000 project budget)

Mr. McCue asked if Ms. McKeon or Mr. McConnaughy had anything to add, but nothing was added. Mr. Oros asked if there were any questions about 2025 Capital Improvements, no questions were asked.

COMMISSIONERS TIME

Park Biologist Mr. Paul Pira and Land Steward Mr. Matt Kneitel presented “Geauga Park District: Deer Hunting Program” This presentation showed the deer management challenge within the parks along with human use in harmony with nature and what this means to the ecological balance. Mr. Pira shared the following information: plant and animal numbers remain fairly consistent within the parks, the ecosystem remains stable and any changes are gradual and take place in response to natural changes. Around 1900 there were zero deer in Ohio. However, with the help of the Division of Wildlife and government, deer restocking was done in the 1930’s. In the 1970s, Ohio’s deer population had grown from fewer than 20,000 animals to 700,000 today. The impact of this growth/overabundance of deer, has reduced the natural biodiversity of land by deer eating native plants (the park has the threatened species/plant ‘hobblebush’ also known as native *Viburnum* at Observatory Park which deer love to eat only because it has an 8ft tall fence around it), spread invasive plants, alter forests tree growth/regeneration, there is increased landscape and crop damage and as we all know, safety concerns especially when driving.

Mr. Pira shared that the park district is a member of the Lake Erie Allegheny Partnership (LEAP). This organization created a ‘Deer Conflict Committee’ in 2006, which planned how to deal with the increase in the white-tailed deer population. At that time, the park district also instituted its deer hunting program which is a useful tool managing our deer population. LEAP members believe that natural communities need to be actively managed and conserved based on scientific principles and best management practices. LEAP recognizes that white-tailed deer are an important component of the region’s biodiversity however when factors favor high deer populations, they can cause damage to ecosystems and negatively impact human safety. At times it is necessary to use human interventions to manage deer population numbers.

Mr. Pira stated that the Geauga Park District’s Wildlife Management Policy (starting in 2006) meets all guidelines/authority of Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) – Division of Wildlife and Fish and Wildlife Management programs attempt to sustain healthy wildlife populations. The general concepts for hunting and trapping is to control the balance to our ecosystem, much like dealing with invasive species removal, prescribed fires and other natural resources management techniques. In the case of deer, nature provided predator, also known as ‘keystone species’ that kept the population in balance (cougars and wolves). When those predators were eliminated, the deer population grew in unnaturally large numbers. To quote a personal communication from 2006 from Tom Stanley (Retired Chief of Natural Resources – Cleveland MetroParks) ‘What many people do not realize, or perhaps ignore, is that while it is true that wolves and cougars were significant “alpha” predators in this part of the United States, the most important historic predators for both turkey and deer were humans... Hunting is in reality an action that restores a natural predator to the Park District.’

Geauga Park Districts hunting program started in 2006/2007 with the goal to sustain a healthy number of deer in balance with other plants and animals using archery and firearms techniques.

Mr. Matt Kneitel shared that in the past three years, the Natural Resource Management department has conducted ‘Deer Browse Impact Surveys’ to quantify the effects of deer in our parks. Marking a 50 square foot circular plot every 100 feet along a transect, covering as many plots as possible, Mr. Kneitel viewed the native and invasive plants, ephemerals and deer effects/presence at Sunnybrook, The Rookery, The West Woods, Frohring Meadows, Observatory Park and Swine Creek Reservation. The goal of the survey was to get as many samples as possible reducing any effects of outliers that we may have. For example, if one plot is different from others, the group of plots as a whole reflect the park and presents more usable data. For the survey, Mr. Kneitel was looking at native vegetation and woody regenerations, and how the deer impact those areas but also if the deer were even present in those areas. Native plant and tree regeneration, based on the current data, shows the parks are looking good based on ‘deer browse’ data. As the data is collected in the future, we’ll have a better understanding

of deer impact on the parks.

Mr. Kneitel stated that in conclusion, these surveys can provide data-driven insight to the deer hunting program within the Geauga Park District, and how properties have benefited in terms of preservation of our natural resources along with a healthy way to monitor and manage the deer population impact on park biodiversity. Mr. Pira shared that deer population, if left under natural good conditions, will replenish at about 30-40% every year which needs to be curtailed that exponential growth. The deer hunting program is a good collaborative effort to stem this growth with the public and the Park District staff.

For the hunting program, Chief Dennis Sloan shared the Ranger Department assesses the parks recommended by Natural Resource Management and determines which method will be used to hunt on those specified properties (archery or gun). Once the method is established, the Rangers determine what is the safest number of hunters they can allow on that property. Chief Sloan also stated that for gun hunting, the park is closed to the public, neighbors to the park properties are notified of those hunting dates and hunter qualifications for both archery and firearms have been required. Chief Sloan also takes calls from hunters, answers their questions and also speaks with the hunters before and after the hunting season to see how to improve the process and experience. Chief Sloan also mentioned this program is beneficial to some hunters since it encourages them to stay within the county and hunt rather than needing to travel to other areas. Chief Sloan also thanked the administrative staff on their work for processing permits and managing the paperwork.

Mr. Oros congratulated Board of Park Commissioners President Ray Guarino with the reading of a proclamation issued from the Geauga Park District to honor his leadership, service and contributions to the fabric of our community during Italian-American Month. Mr. Oros thanked Mr. Guarino for his service to the Park District as a commissioner and his contributions to the people in Geauga County.

Mr. Oros also congratulated the Geauga Park District's administrative and planning staff for successfully applying for and receiving a Capital Improvement Award for Beartown Lakes Reservation to afford site and playground improvements. Funds were appropriated by the 135th Ohio General Assembly through House Bill 2 for state fiscal years 2025 and 2026 in the amount of \$344,075 administered through ODNR. Mr. Oros thanked Senator Sikes, who represents the district where Beartown Lakes is located, for helping to appropriate those funds.

Mr. Oros congratulated the Geauga Park District's finance staff for the successful audit of fiscal years ending December 31, 2021 through December 31, 2022 by the Ohio Auditor of State. Mr. Oros shared that this information can be found by the public at the Ohio State Auditors webpage.

At Veterans Legacy Woods last Monday, September 9 in the afternoon, about 45 residents gathered to dedicate the new Rainbow Bridge, allowing owners of lost pets to memorialize them by hanging collars and tags on its railings. Specific to this park, special tributes may also be paid to military dogs, police K-9 units and services. Guest speaking at the dedication was Bev McClelland, wife of former Geauga County Sheriff Dan McClelland, whose K-9 Midge was Geauga's most famous service dog. The concept of a Rainbow Bridge was spearheaded and executed by Karen and Gary Herwig, who, with Jill Hall, built the bridge's special railings. Lenny Barcikowski from Carter Lumber donated all the lumber and screws, and Geauga Park District provided the coated metal fencing. Thanks to all these individuals, as well as construction staff Isaiah Shipman and Joshua Inks, who consulted with the Herwigs to help them make our new Rainbow Bridge a reality.

And from the Naturalist Department -

- This Labor Day weekend, we greeted an estimated 16,775 people to our fair building, which announced the winners of our public *Top 10 Trails Contest* and hosted our signature Monarch Butterflies. Naturalists and volunteers also helped 930 children sample archery during our shifts in the nearby archery building.
- From August 11 to 12, Observatory Park's Moths & Meteors overnight camping event drew 410 patrons, a great success.
- In the month of August, there were 732 boat rentals at Headwaters Park and 158 ropes course climbers at Claridon Woodlands, finishing up both seasons.
- The Naturalists conducted 88 programs with attendance of 11,801, this includes August fair-goers.

Mr. Oros read an email from Cynthia and Eric Berschig who thanked Joe Slepko, his staff and the planning department.

Dear Mr. Oros,

On September 5th and 6th we reserved Veterans Legacy Park for our daughter’s wedding celebration. I am writing to you today to praise and commend the staff that maintains and operates this venue. To begin, on Thursday we entered the building, and it was CLEAN! The carpet had recently been scrubbed, floors shining, and bathrooms in excellent condition. We were then greeted by Joe, an outstanding gentleman that walked us through every aspect of the kitchen from refrigeration, ice machine, warming ovens, breakers. and finally an extensive lesson on how to properly use the dishwasher. I shared with him how happy we were with the cleanliness of the building and he said they had just spent time cleaning the carpet. He absolutely takes pride in the care and maintenance of this building. He was so kind and it was refreshing to work with someone who wanted to make sure we had everything we needed and all our questions answered. On Friday morning another gentleman came in just to ask if there was anything we needed. We had noticed on Thursday evening that a light was out in the hallway by the men’s bathroom and my daughter asked if he could fix the light. He did and again your staff was making sure the building was good to go for our event. At the end of the evening, your venue supplied the cleaning products/tools we needed to leave it in clean condition for the next group.

Lastly, I commend the individuals who worked on the design elements of the clubhouse. It is absolutely beautiful. I am so grateful that the Geauga Parks offers such a nice place for its residents to host events.

Please know that our family appreciates you and your staff’s hard work to make this park the best it can be for the residents of Geauga County.

*Sincerely, Cynthia & Eric Berschig
Newbury Resident*

EXECUTIVE SESSION

Mr. Oros asked if there were any items for Executive Session. No items were brought forward.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF NEXT BOARD MEETING: Mr. Oros announced the next meeting is Monday, October 21, 2024 at 8:30 a.m.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Oros asked for a motion to adjourn. Mr. Guarino made a motion to adjourn the meeting, Mr seconded the motion and after a roll-call voice vote, the motion was approved.

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| Mr. Bates | Yes |
| Mr. Guarino | Yes |
| Mr. LaGatta | Absent |
| Mr. Stein | Yes |
| Ms. Carnabuci | Yes |

The meeting was adjourned at 9:26 a.m.

SUNSHINE LAW COMPLIANCE

It is declared that notification of this meeting and any business conducted therein by the Geauga Park District Board of Commissioners was in compliance with Ohio’s Sunshine Laws.

Respectfully submitted,

John Oros, Executive Director

Ray Guarino, President