

February 2021 Park Views
By Rick Landt, APRC Commissioner
Ashland Park Projects Carry on In Spite of Pandemic

The City of Ashland and the related but separate entity, Ashland Parks and Recreation Commission (APRC), have not been spared the havoc brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. In response to pandemic-caused revenue losses during the spring of 2020, APRC laid off 15% of its employees. Many of APRC's recreational programs were either curtailed or shuttered.

This is on top of a long-brewing reckoning over the basic funding of Ashland's parks. APRC property tax revenues, specified by forward-thinking citizens back in 1908 (led by the Women's Civic Improvement Club) and enshrined in the City Charter, were guaranteed until the 1990s when state law preempted the City's Charter and lumped APRC property tax revenues with the City's. Thus, although APRC continues to control and manage Ashland's parklands as per the Charter, revenues that had been guaranteed are now subject to City Council and Budget Committee decisions.

Fortunately, until recently, the revenue continued to be allocated to APRC at the same rate (\$2.09/\$1000 of property valuation) dictated by the Charter per what has been called the "gentleman's agreement" and I would call a "word of honor agreement." Unfortunately for our parks, that same level of support was not provided during this past biennium budget cycle.

Current financial pressures continue to threaten the APRC budget. These pressures include systemic PERS increases, community requests for more and higher quality services, and increased demands from City departments for finite property tax revenues.

A large part of Ashland's ambitious vision for parks is spelled out in the City's Comprehensive Plan, which includes having a park within a quarter mile of every resident, preserving natural features, and providing trails that link urban and natural areas. Backed by strong community support, many of these goals have been met, resulting in improved quality of life for our community. However, they have also increased the cost of maintaining our parks, trails and open spaces.

Given the above headwinds, it would be reasonable to ask why projects like the Japanese Garden renovation in Lithia Park and the East Main Park design and development are moving forward. That's the question that I would like to address.

The inspiration for transforming the existing Japanese-style garden to an authentic Japanese Garden came from Jeff Mangin, whose family donated the money for the renovation. No taxpayer's money is involved in this project other than "in kind" work that APRC staff has performed to prepare the site. In addition to enhancing a beloved and original element of Lithia Park, this project brings construction work to Ashland at a time when our local economy needs it. Most of the work will be done by local contractors.

The East Main Park project, envisioned as a combination neighborhood park, dog park and bike-skills park is currently in the design phase. Likewise, this project brings work to local contractors (the chosen design team is entirely made up of local professionals). The community was fortunate that the previous owners were willing to sell APRC the property at almost 50% below the appraised value in support of parks. The money to purchase the land came from selling surplus property adjacent to YMCA Park. The surplus property was originally bought for expanded soccer fields and then was designated for a second dog park (though in a suboptimal location that would have required users to drive through a quiet residential neighborhood).

The majority of the money for developing the East Main Park comes from the sale of the YMCA Park itself. The YMCA Park was sold to the YMCA because it was determined that it was not in the taxpayers' best interests to be spending over \$50,000 annually on maintenance when deed restrictions on the property severely limited the property's use for the general public.

The remainder of the money to develop East Main Park comes from revenues from Ashland's Food and Beverage Tax that was set aside a half dozen years ago for a second dog park. Incidentally, in addition to providing a second dog park that over the years has had widespread support, the second dog park should decrease cross-City traffic, thus decreasing pollution and congestion, consistent with the transportation section of the City's Comprehensive Plan.

I hope this summary of two key current park projects adds context to the work that APRC continues to perform for our community in spite of the pandemic.

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