

WESTCHESTER COUNTY CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
CHARTER AND CODE FOCUS GROUP MINUTES
July 17, 2012

Members in Attendance: Guy Parisi, Richard Wishnie, Florence McCue
County Staff in Attendance: Chris Crane
Guest: Joe Stout, Former Parks Commissioner and present
Executive Director of Friends of Westchester County
Parks
Location: Westchester County Center

Focus Group Chairman Parisi called the meeting to order at 12:00 pm

The purpose of the meeting was to follow up on ideas proposed by Mr. Stout at our last full CRC meeting on June 28, 2012.

June 28, 2012 presentation by Mr. Stout:

The idea of the establishment of a parks district (similar to our county water and sewer district) was discussed. It would create a different method of funding. There would be a level, steady tax, a dedicated tax, under the county taxing authority. No park would be eliminated. There are now 28 CSEA employees left at Playland and their positions would be honored. For budget year 2012, \$34 million is earmarked in the county budget for parks and recreation and is used to maintain and service and provide salaries and benefits for employees for 50 parks without Playland. When Playland is included, income of \$183 is generated and so, we get a return of almost \$5 for each \$1 spent. \$52 is the operating budget and \$19 mil is Misc (debt service and employee benefits) for a total of \$71 million.

Today we obtained further information:

Mr. Stout said it would be beneficial to put Playland back into the County parks grouping. He thinks a parks Authority

GP: Parks are located in some districts within the county and not others. Would the “new” system of funding mean that only the towns where parks were located would be taxed?

JS: No, because all county residents could use.

RW: So, parks should be looked at differently?

JS: Yes, because other departments don’t generate fees and we receive \$183 million a year through the county parks operations. They also generate over 1,000 private sector jobs. And, there would be advantages in terms of obtaining outside funding from grants and donors.

GP: If it were a district, the \$ raised would go into the district fund.

JS: Being different from the general fund would be the biggest advantage.

RW: So, if parks generated a surplus, it would not go into the general fund.

JS: They would be enterprise funds---when a surplus, then \$ put aside for capital or charge off for Administrative fees.

JS: The county tax bill would show a breakdown of, Water, Sewer, county taxes, and Parks.

JS: The sore thumb is the amusement park. There are those who say, "Government should not run an amusement park".

Parks budget costs \$35 a year per resident, it is the least expensive way of operating it.

The Playland Commission has gone out of business.

The Parks Dept budget is \$52 mil in 2012;

\$52 mil operating budget

\$19 mil is county's debt service and employee benefits
(except for the County Center, Ice Casino, Hudson
Hills Golf Course and the amusement park)

Tax levy is \$33 million a year.

Is there any advantage to the taxpayer? No

JS: The advantage is to separate and preserve the asset. We could seek grants and legacies by shining a light on it...and for every \$1 invested, \$5 comes back.

CC: With a "special district" can charge based on property.

JS: No Enterprise Fund, No Public Benefit Corp. In Westchester County 70% of the operating budget comes from Fees and 30% from taxes. Elsewhere it is usually reversed (30% fees and 70% taxes).

JS: In 1978 the "Friends of the Parks" was created. Herman Geist was **the** "friend". Then they sent kids to two camps. It was established to raise money for the parks and to get donations. They got \$32,000 in 2003 and get \$2 million now. It is a not for profit. They run a camp for DSS foster care kids and those on public assistance. They have 60 kids in their sibling camp in the county---for kids who are separated from their siblings to go to camp together. There is a board of 25 and they are concerned that the park land will be decreased. It is a "green issue" for them.

JS: This plan could save money because of the potential for privatization.

FMc: I have concerns about the possible disappearance of union jobs. The quality of work can go down. JS: In some cases yes and in some, no. There could be a financial benefit to the county if grants and donations were increased for the parks.

Focus Group meeting adjourned at 1:10 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Florence McCue