

York Neighborhood Association General Membership Meeting

Norway Hall—1419 North Forest Street

February 28, 2024 Minutes

Approved: Motion 2024-04-18.1 ✓

Present: YNA Board members Colin Beazley (President), Chris Donaldson (Vice President), Opie Knechtel (Treasurer), Mark Ellis Walker (Secretary), Tom Scott, Megan Doyle, Kevin Cussen, and about six or so community members (including Harriet Spanel Park Steward Mark Schofield and Board prospect Paul D'Agnolo), plus guest speakers Laine Potter and Jonathan Schilk of the City of Bellingham Parks Department.

Excused: Jeremy Ferrera.

Absent: Mars Lindgren, John DeOrio, Élan Engel.

Called to order at 6:30pm by Colin with general introductions of community members.

1. Introductions and Quick Updates

After Colin had all the Board members in attendance introduce themselves, he reported a recent development he learned at the most recent meeting of the Mayor's Neighborhood Advisory Commission (MNAC) that both pertains to and impacts the Rock Hill Park renovation which will be the focus of this evening's gathering and the presentation by the Parks Department representatives, and that is that the City's Comprehensive Plan Update now in progress has as one of its state-level mandates a priority focus on the need for housing. It means that all 25 neighborhood plans in Bellingham will now fundamentally be in conflict with that, as it stipulates that (for example) City zoning and development codes will be amended to allow middle housing forms in all residential zones and allow up to 4 homes per lot (or up to six if two are affordable to 80% of Area Median Income).

It's unclear at this point how areas designated as Historic Districts will be shielded or exempted from this, if at all, but he will continue to monitor developments and report on them as they unfold.

2. Parks Department Presentation

After explaining what the provided handouts at each table were—initial results of a Rock Hill Park Refresh online survey recently launched by the YNA's committee on the park's renovation, plus an aerial photo of the park with locations of existing features and areas of use labeled—Colin turned the remainder of the meeting over to our guests from the Parks Department staff. Laine Potter and Jonathan Schilk introduced themselves and their relevant background...Jonathan for instance having worked on the creation of Franklin Park (now Harriet Spanel Park), a project he's still proud of.

Laine gave an overview of the background of the upcoming/imminent renovation of Rock Hill Park (RHP). The park has one of the oldest park playgrounds in Bellingham, and one of the community's priority needs is a place for kids to play. She cited Bloedel Donovan Park and Happy Valley Park as the other two of the Parks Department's top three projects needing renovation and that RHP is now #1. The project is now in their budget and ready to begin. It is to be considered a "renovation plus"

project, meaning that it's not just about replacing the playground but also assessing the entire park and how to make the best use of all of it for community and city needs.

[If I can get a photo or two from the Parks Dept of the boards/illustrations they presented, I'll add them here.]

Where in the process are we? Jonathan says they're in the middle of getting qualifications for the array of consultants that will need to be involved; these include engineers, architects, landscape architects, geotechnical specialists, et cetera, including attention to seismic-risk realities and tribal involvement due to the potential for archaeological findings in the process. Although the RHP renovation will begin first, construction of Bloedel Donovan's will probably happen first because RHP's site has more tricky concerns than just a playground as in that project. Planning and design will continue until probably March 2025, with construction then happening around March 2026; this first phase will include multiple neighborhood meetings to both hear from the community about priorities/wishes and inform attendees about the project's progress.

A Park Committee for this project will be meeting right away. Neighborhood meetings will be held around the 30% point of the planning stage and again at the 60% point, so anticipate the first to be sometime late this summer. That one will probably be a citywide planning one, but Tom notes that it could be a joint one with a YNA General Meeting.

It was emphasized that we are not in the design phase yet! This is just the time for the presenting and gathering of ideas. Residents interested in volunteering to be on this committee should anticipate participating at two to four meetings.

3. Q&A Session

At this point, the presenters answered questions posed by several attendees. Among them:

- the possibility of augmenting the project's budget with outside grants; on the downside, it would draw things out on the timeline, but there are pros and cons as well as small "neighborhood improvement" funding options for projects kept on the small side.
- the question of whether the potential for a population-density explosion was being taken into consideration; Laine noted that the access-priorities aspect of the planning process was based on distance to walk to reach a park, not necessarily on population density.
- a discussion of the need to keep in mind the various groups of York residents who use the park (e.g., kids, students, dog owners) and the intention of matching their needs with amenities. While we can't expand the park's physical size, we can draw in more users with more-fun playground equipment and amenities. More amenities however would mean more draw for use by non-York visitors, thus parking issues.
- Jonathan talked about ways of "packing in fun" and not just providing the amenities one typically assumes a park will have. Examples include what they've been planning for the new Storybrook Park coming to the Birchwood neighborhood—"things to traverse"—and the crab trap at Shuksan Meadows Park. In the case of RHP, it could involve incorporating the central rock feature in ways such as climbing features (among others already suggested).

Other parks to look at for additional ideas are Lorraine Ellis Park in the Columbia neighborhood and the new Cordata Park in the Cordata neighborhood.

- safety issues, an ongoing concern of residents as evidenced by both the new online survey and past ones; fencing with adjacent properties is an opportunity, encouraged by the property owners, not an obstacle. It was noted that safety issues are not unique to RHP and that the leaning-out of undergrowth by the retaining wall has been a big help regarding safety concerns about park use over the last six to eight months.
- accessibility issues; the current playground is not at all accessible, and neither is the transition zone from the upper to the lower areas. An accessible path or an embankment slide/ramp with a low grade is a possibility for mitigating this, probably separate from the proposed slide from the upper to the lower areas of the park.
- use by dog owners; there is a possibility that the 12-foot access zone along the I-5 sound wall, which Washington State Department of Transportation requires (and which could not be used for addition of structures), could be accommodated in design options such as a fenced dog run. There is still a water line running to the northern end of the park, from when there was a house there, and while a bathroom structure is probably not a realistic option for this small a park, a combination of drinking fountains and a spigot for water for dogs is.
- the suggestion of a mini three-hole disc-golf course is a popular and doable idea, although it was noted that there are concerns about discs flying over the sound wall onto I-5. The upper area above the playground is also already used for croquet.
- demographic age range to be surveyed; it was noted that it's important to survey kids as well as adult users of the park!

Colin and Kevin, as cochairs of the YNA committee on the park renovation, will continue to collect ideas submitted through the Rock Hill Park Refresh survey and pass them along to the Parks Department's committee for the project.

Meeting Adjourned at 7:54pm.

Respectfully submitted by Mark Ellis Walker, Board Secretary.