

PARKS & RECREATION COMMITTEE

OF THE

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

Minutes

A regular meeting of the Parks and Recreation Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, 725 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on June 4, 2008.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Leg. Vivian Vilorio-Fisher, Chairperson
Leg. Lou D'Amaro, Vice Chairperson
Leg. Cameron Alden
Leg. Lynne C. Nowick
Leg. Steven H. Stern

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

George Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature
Barbara LoMoriello, Deputy Clerk
Lance Reinheimer, Assistant Director of Budget Review
Jill Moss, Budget Review Office
John W. Pavacic, Commissioner of Parks
Ben Zwirn, Deputy County Executive
Joe Dujmic, County Executive Office
William Shilling, Aide to the Presiding Officer
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
Thomas Ryan, Aide to Leg. Vilorio-Fisher
Justin Littell, Aide to Leg. D'Amaro
Paul Perillie, Aide to the Majority Leader
Linda Bay, Aide to the Minority Leader
Debra Alloncius, AME Legislative Director
Richard Rocchio, LI Golf Course Association
Patrick K. Boyles, Park Police Chairperson
And all other interested parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Kraus, Court Stenographer

(THE MEETING COMMENCED AT 1:13 PM)

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Welcome today to the meeting of the Parks and Recreation Committee. If you can please join us in the Pledge led by almost Nowick.

SALUTATION

Thank you.

PUBLIC PORTION

I believe we have one card. Mr. Rocchio, did you submit your card? I don't see it. Madam Clerk, do we have a -- well, I know who you are so can you come forward and we will get your card.

MR. ROCCHIO:

You know where I live,

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

I could find you. Okay, if you could, Dick, just introduce yourself for the record and say who you represent. You can see sit down and use the mike right there. Thank you, Ben. You see what great public servants we have. Our Deputy County Executive, he turns the mike on.

MR. ROCCHIO:

My name is Richard Rocchio, R-o-c-c-h-i-o. I represent the Long Island Golf Course Association. And just very briefly New York State Senate and Assembly have a bill going through the maze of political nonsense in Albany. It may take a year to pass through; to study the issue of municipal competition with privately held industries in the outdoor recreation area. They include golf courses, camping and skiing and so on.

We are concerned on Long Island with the municipal competition with golf courses essentially. And I'm not asking for any kind of legislation. What I'd like to do is have a meeting with the Commissioner and a couple of the contractors who run the municipal courses with a couple of my members to just discuss the issues that are of concern to them. And I think there are some misconceptions on our part that we would like to clarify and maybe we could work together.

In my role as the President of the organization, I represent all of golf. We don't distinguish municipal courses and privately held or private clubs. We want to help the golf industry in general. And we're doing that fairly well. The area is presently up for the month of April. We're up about 25 percent. So I think everybody gets a piece of that pie.

So we would like to request a get together informal with the Commissioner and a couple of operators, contractors and a couple of my guys and discuss this whole issue and see if we can come to some resolution. Any questions?

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

I thought you would have questions. Legislator Alden has a question for you, Mr. Rocchio.

MR. ROCCHIO:

What's your handicap?

LEG. ALDEN:

The Commissioner -- what your handicap is or mine? Mine ballooned to an eight so I got problems. I'm working with my local pro, though. My local PGA pro to get it up higher because I want to go play in a couple of events where I get strokes instead of giving strokes.

What do you think of, you know, give me some outside parameters what the issues are that you want to discuss. The Commissioner's here so, you know, we can --

MR. ROCCHIO:

Probably one of major problems is that we built too many golf courses on Long Island. So I don't know that --

LEG. ALDEN:

No, I don't know if was you that came before us when we were looking at Yaphank to put in the two golf courses over there?

MR. ROCCHIO:

No, no, I wasn't involved with them at that time. I was involved with a national organization at that time.

LEG. ALDEN:

Well, just to give you a little history, some of the local owners of the privately held but open to the public courses came in and said that, you know, it's saturated. And that was one of the reasons why we didn't go a lot further with it. And that's about, what was it, about six or seven years ago?

MR. ROCCHIO:

It's about that.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

It was a few years ago. Legislator Alden, if I may because I have spoken with Mr. Rocchio and I've looked at the Assembly bill. And part of what their issues are and we've begun to clarify some of them is that there's a sense that private golf courses are at a disadvantage to courses that are on municipal property because what they have to pay in real estate taxes. And the municipal golf courses are able to charge less, I believe. Those are some of the issues that Mr. Rocchio brought up.

I had -- on his behalf I had spoken with the Commissioner and clarified some of the issues where there seem to be some level of misunderstanding. But there -- there's still a bill out there in the Assembly and in the Senate. And Mr. Rocchio would like, as he said, to meet with the Commissioner so that he can have a fuller understanding. Because, for example, there was -- there was one statement that the taxpayers were carrying the burden. And, of course, you know, we clarified that actually these golf courses produce revenue for the County rather than cost the taxpayer money. So that's just in a nutshell the very beginning of the discussion.

MR. ROCCHIO:

Well, I did clarify that question though because statewide there are several municipal courses especially with cities and towns where the taxpayers pick up a hundred, \$200,000 a year in lost revenue. Where we are concerned, one is real estate taxes. Our golf courses are paying two, \$300,000 a year. A municipal course may pay a fee to the County but none of that fee is shared with the school districts, which then bounces back to the taxpayer. Municipal courses can hide some of their employees who are parks payroll rather than the golf course itself. Municipal courses can buy their chemicals and equipment through a state contract which saves them about 30 or 40 percent. These kinds of issues make it possible for a municipal golf course to charge less. We like to feel that they give less. If you play a County course, it's not quite as good as playing one of our

premier courses --

LEG. ALDEN:

There you're going to get an argument.

MR. ROCCHIO:

-- which is not always true.

LEG. ALDEN:

But you're entitled to your opinion.

MR. ROCCHIO:

Yeah. Some of the County courses are pretty darn good, which is also a problem. And costs to play golf has gone up tremendously. A privately held course may charge 60 bucks to play a round of golf. Their payroll, their fuel cost, their insurance cost, their real estate taxes, all of that puts them in a position where they're hardly making a profit; where a county course can charge 25 or 30. I can play state courses. I'm a senior citizen. I can play state courses for 12 bucks for a nine hole round. You know, and that's really hitting. And they're loaded. I mean, they're running rounds like crazy. A good golf course under normal situation will run about 25,000 rounds a year. And the County courses are probably running in the vicinity of 30 or 40,000 rounds a year. So that kind of shows you how the disparity in cost to play has an effect on the industry.

LEG. ALDEN:

But, I'm just -- I'm going to point out something to you. And then -- and I think you really do have to sit down with the Commissioner.

MR. ROCCHIO:

Yeah, that's what we'd like to do.

LEG. ALDEN:

Because there seems to be a huge misunderstanding. But what is the history of a municipally owned golf course? And on Long Island I could you that I wouldn't have been able to play golf if it hadn't been for Suffolk County and New York State because --

MR. ROCCHIO:

Myself, too.

LEG. ALDEN:

Right. Bethpage, that was one of the only -- you know, because I couldn't afford to belong to a country club growing up so I had to play at a, you know, state-owned or county-owned golf course. And that gives all these kids and everybody else an opportunity to get in there. But you do have to sit -- and that's a history of why municipal courses actually, you know, popped into existence.

I don't think you're going to see a lot of municipal courses being built in Suffolk County anymore; not by Suffolk County anyway. Because basically we looked at that issue and there was an over-saturation. And we didn't want to create a situation where we're just robbing from you to, you know, just have another county course. So that idea was explored and was abandoned pretty much. But I don't see our golf courses, the County courses, and I would hope not, I don't see them, you know, being abandoned at this point because I think there's an opportunity for --

MR. ROCCHIO:

I wouldn't think so either. I would rather not see that happen.

LEG. ALDEN:

Good. All right. So I think we're probably all on the same page.

MR. ROCCHIO:

I think the municipal courses have a very important --

LEG. ALDEN:

But actually --

MR. ROCCHIO:

-- part in the growth of golf.

LEG. ALDEN:

But I'll put some of our golf courses, against, you know, some privately owned golf courses any day especially Timber Point. I get a chance to play down there and that place -- it's a challenging round of golf and it's a beautiful place.

MR. ROCCHIO:

Right. Except when it's foggy.

LEG. ALDEN:

But your course would be bad, too.

MR. ROCCHIO:

No, I agree. If we could set up that meeting, that would be terrific so we'll go with that.

LEG. ALDEN:

Good.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Okay. Well, the Commissioner's here. And, so, you know, he's sitting right behind you.

MR. ROCCHIO:

Oh oh.

LEG. ALDEN:

We don't assign his time, though. You're going to have to, you know, work the time out with him because --

MR. ROCCHIO:

Oh, we'll work it out with him. And I'd like to get a couple of contractors from the County with a couple of my guys. And I don't own a golf course. My mother didn't grow any stupid children.

LEG. ALDEN:

But you know how -- but you know how our set is, right? I mean, we own the golf course. Everything comes into Suffolk County.

MR. ROCCHIO:

Exactly.

LEG. ALDEN:

And we do -- we do have people like the caterer in there and we have a golf pro and usually that's the set up. Good.

MR. ROCCHIO:

I appreciate that.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Legislator Nowick has a question.

LEG. NOWICK:

No, I'm just -- I'm wondering --

MR. ROCCHIO:

I don't give lessons.

LEG. NOWICK:

No, that's okay because we have the PGA pro here ready to give us tips. And boy could we use some tips.

LEG. ALDEN:

You and I especially.

LEG. NOWICK:

My question, and just briefly, were you thinking of a way to lower your prices?

MR. ROCCHIO:

Yes.

LEG. NOWICK:

By using --

LEG. ALDEN:

Tax breaks.

MR. ROCCHIO:

That's exactly -- one of the problems that we had, I talked to a prior Commissioner whose hackles got up because he thought we were looking to have them raise their rates, which is impossible.

LEG. NOWICK:

No, and that wouldn't help you at all other than competition.

MR. ROCCHIO:

We are looking for a more level playing field.

LEG. NOWICK:

So in other words maybe --

MR. ROCCHIO:

We want to see some relief -- in my estimation a golf course is the best way to preserve open land. It's productive. It's environmentally safe. And there's no consideration given to the fact that it's open land being cared for by responsible people in the tax rate. So we'd like to see the taxes addressed. We'd like to see some issues on insurance and things of that -- insurance has escalated tremendously. And just level the playing field as much as possible. That's all. And we don't want to see the County and the towns change much at all.

LEG. NOWICK:

Okay.

MR. ROCCHIO:

Other than to recognize that we are in competition but we shouldn't be.

LEG. NOWICK:

So you're not looking for changes in the County?

MR. ROCCHIO:

I don't think so.

LEG. NOWICK:

You're looking for ways where you can kind of get some relief not only with taxes but perhaps when you're purchasing -- purchasing bulk, I don't know, insurance, if that could be done but -- okay, I just want to understand what you wanted.

MR. ROCCHIO:

Let me give you one example. Do I have one second? When the Town of Brookhaven decided to take over Mill Pond Golf Course, that was a deal made between the owner and the town. They got an operator. I met with Supervisor Foley before he was elected because I knew he was going to get elected. And I had a few of my guys with me. And we had a good talk about this issue. If you're going to have an operator or contractor come in and run the golf course, establish a fee that is reasonably close to what that person would pay in real estate taxes, which they did. The operator of that golf course is paying the town pretty darn near what the owner was paying in real estate taxes. The only glitch in that is that the school district doesn't get any part of it.

Now, the result of that is his prices to a Brookhaven resident are about \$5 cheaper than the competing golf courses around the village, around the area. But to a non-Brookhaven resident, it's pretty equal. So this kind of satisfies our needs. It's not unfair competition and it's a heck of a nice little golf course. So, you know, that's what we'd like to see, some understanding of the position of my guys in relation to the municipal courses.

LEG. ALDEN:

Can I ask one more question?

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Sure. Legislator Alden has another question.

LEG. ALDEN:

So you said that you knew Foley was going to get elected. You have a crystal ball? Can we contact you for, you know, in case we want to run for something, too.

MR. ROCCHIO:

Legislator Fisher can tell you I'm a very politically astute person. I predict the outcome. McCain is going to be the President so you will know that.

LEG. NOWICK:

All right.

LEG. ALDEN:

That's not going to make Legislator Viloría-Fisher very happy but me I'm smiling.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Did I invite you to come here?

MR. ROCCHIO:

Okay? Thank you very much.

LEG. NOWICK:

We'll know how good he is in November.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Thank you, Mr. Rocchio.

Okay. Is there anyone else in the audience who wishes to address the Committee? If not, Commissioner, if you could just join us at the table. I don't really see anything that would -- I don't see anything that would be problematic on the agenda. But just in case, is there anything you'd like to point out to us before we begin to look at the agenda?

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

Let me just get my agenda open. Just in regard to -- in regard to the Chandler estate, there was an adaptive reuse study done several years ago. It was completed at the end of 2006. And it did establish a cost for doing work that would make improvements to make it more of a passive use park including a parking area, signage and trail work. And it's my understanding this proposed resolution would -- resolution 1346 would be in furtherance of that.

I will tell you right now that in the 2009 capital budget, \$200,000 has been proposed towards construction. The total, though, that was in the adaptive reuse study was closer to a million dollars. However, the \$500,000 proposed would accomplish a great deal of the physical work including the parking. In regard to --

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

And, actually Commissioner, just to stay on 1346, that was tabled not because the project itself is not worthy of exploration, but rather because it's such a tight budget that we're looking at. And when we looked at \$500,000, it seemed high for this particular project at this particular time. And that's why that indeed was tabled.

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

Thanks. I'm just offering that as additional edification regarding the background for that, that it is --

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

But would you be able to, then, introduce something that would be pared down?

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

I wasn't --

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Or speak with the sponsor rather?

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

This wasn't -- this wasn't something that Parks Department introduced.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

No, I see that the sponsor was Legislator Losquadro who represents that district.

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

Right.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

And it's a beautiful piece of property and we recognize the worthiness but perhaps if you could work with the sponsor and look at how we can pare that down.

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

Sure, we can certainly do that. Okay.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Okay. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

You're welcome.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Did you want to speak to the next resolution? I did meet with Tracey Bellone on that.

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

Right. And I believe that this will continue to be tabled until the work group re-visits this and --

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Yes, she's asked to pull the work -- do you know if she has a date yet on that because our next meeting --

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

We're going to be working on that. I'm going to be getting a letter out to the members of that work group. A few folks have been added to that. We've gotten some additional responses from some of the other municipalities. So we'll be getting that out along with the information that Tom Ryan of your staff was able to obtain and distribute. And we'll get that out to everybody, but we're shooting to have a meeting later this month to address this.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Okay. You know, our next cycle comes up pretty quickly.

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

Right, right.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

So if you could get the meeting done before that so that we don't have to table this at the next cycle again.

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

Okay.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Or if we could -- if it's impossible to get people together physically perhaps we could try to get their responses electronically. Tom has been very, very diligent in e-mailing the drafts of the bill and then the bill and then the amended copy trying to seek responses from members of that committee. So if we can't physically meet perhaps we can encourage people to give us their responses through e-mail.

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

All right, will do. And just as an additional item, it's not on the agenda, but I know, you know, Parks Committee and individual Legislators have asked me about the status of dog parks. I will you that we met earlier this week with the Long Island Dog Group in regard to both Coindre Hall and some additional potentials sites, two of which are located in Central Suffolk; however, I don't mention them by name because we need to look at certain planning and environmental constraints, but we're planning on setting up a field meeting with them in the near future to go out there and explore these two additional potential sites with them to see if those are suitable -- potentially suitable sites for dog parks.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Good. Thank you, Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER PAVACIC:

You're welcome.

TABLED RESOLUTIONS

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Okay, so we'll move to the agenda. **IR 1346, amending the 2008 Capital Budget and Program and appropriating funds in connection with improvements to historic Chandler Estate. (Losquadro)** I will make a motion to table.

LEG. D'AMARO:

Second.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Seconded by Vice Chair Legislator Lou D'Amaro. All in favor? Opposed?

IR 1346 is tabled. (Vote: 5-0)

IR 1357, adopting local law number - 2008, a local law to protect the County's historic and culturally significant properties. (Viloria-Fisher) I will make a motion to table.

LEG. D'AMARO:

Second.

CHAIRPERSON VILORIA-FISHER:

Seconded by Legislator D'Amaro. All in favor? Opposed? **1357 stands tabled. (Vote: 5-0)**

If there are no other items on the agenda, is there any question from the audience or the Committee? If not, the meeting stands adjourned.

**(THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 1:33 PM)
{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**