

## **PARKS SPECIAL MEETING NOTES FOR March 24, 2021**

*The meeting was called to order by Mary Wohleb at 6:05pm with a quorum of Martin Howard, Ken Lee, Ollie Iversen and Marty Pease. Annie Taylor was absent. Also present were Mayor Ramon Hayes, Scott Thomas, Town Administrator, Mary Wohleb, Town Councilperson and Brian Lease of Public Works.*

Councilmember Mary Wohleb gave an overview of the purpose of this meeting, which is to initiate community involvement and get initial input on the development of the newly acquired 25,000 square foot park on Maple. She said that this is the first part of a process that we're going to gather input here, likely going to do a survey out to the larger community in the next few months- that information will come back to the Park Commission and they will take a look at that, likely have another community meeting to take a look and digest that feedback and start the initiation of a design. So it's going to be a process of involvement. Very much interested in people who are interested in helping design the survey. It will be done at the Park Commission meetings, but they are public meetings so people can attend.

Mayor Ramon Hayes gave an overview of the history of the Maple Park project. In the summer of 2019 the Town was approached by the Hedlin family to buy the Hedlin Field (80,000 square feet) and their desire was to have it preserved as a park. Early on, the town looked at potential grants. Grants for land acquisition are very difficult. In addition to that, the Council at the time was not interested in grants with matching funds because the town had expended so much over the years toward matches and had to allow the town finances to replenish so the offer was declined. The town then came up with a new approach to reengage the Hedlins. The aim was to meet several community goals and so they developed the concept of 75/25%. This meant that 60,000 square feet would be open for development and the remaining 20,000 would be developed over time as a park. This plan would preserve a portion as a park and give the town control over what kind of development would occur and thus meet town goals of open space, housing and enable the town to pay for it.

Council was insistent on a significant campaign for transparency and engaged the newspaper and requested multiple articles over about a year's time regarding this issue. The council agreed to pursue this with these principles in mind and initially agreed to a one-year option payment of \$37,500 to work toward removing the land from public designation to residential zoning. A second option was agreed to as more time was needed. The town put the property for sale, found a buyer, and established a closing date which would allow the town to avoid a second option date. The land has not been sold yet, the town is moving toward that and everything looks very positive but they certainly have not closed on a land deal.

Late in the process a citizens' committee was formed, initially with the goal of preserving all of the Hedlin field as a park. They also researched grants. Then through a lot of conversation with the town their goal was modified toward a portion retained as a park and how much would be retained. The citizens were very concerned about what type of development would exist for both a development portion and a park development portion. The citizen committee was successful in increasing the size of the proposed park area from 20,000 to 24,000, in developing a plan for 10 single-family residential

homes and in controlling the size of those homes (between 1,200 and 1,700 square feet) and also in having more discussion on what an ultimate design plan for a park would look like.

Town Administrator Scott Thomas said that the town has received three comment letters voicing opinions on various park facilities. One letter in particular asked a number of questions, most of which should be addressed in this meeting. If anything is not covered, he asked that they please bring it up at the end of the meeting and the town will provide what information they have.

Thomas said that grant funding influences the park use. The town had initially figured a quarter million to get a park functioning with some play and recreational equipment, etc. Most park funding in the State of Washington is done through the Recreation & Conservation Office. The town would like to apply for a competitive RCO grant and there are a number of options. These grants have their own cycles and are currently in-between cycles for the grants the town is interested in. They will be available in two years so the town needs to be planning and getting ready to apply. To be eligible for a grant, the projects have to be in the Town's Comprehensive Plan. The Town has a parks element so later on this year we will meet that criteria. These grants will require a 25% match by the Town, some of that match can be in kind and what we hope to do is use town staff hours, etc. to meet our match requirements.

Park Commissioner Oliver Iversen said that a number of months ago, the Park Commission roughed out a park design and the Commission is looking for feedback on what people want. In 2019, the Park Commission put out a survey as part of the town's comprehensive plan and got a bunch of ideas back. Among them was more walking trails. For sports fields- 50 people responded, but 5% said they probably would use them. For off-leash dog park, 60 respondents who said they would use it regularly. Tennis and pickleball was also mentioned.

Amy McFeely read a letter from Linda Talman. Talman suggested naming the park "Hedlin Park" to honor the family that enabled the people of the area to enjoy the park for so many years. Some ideas she had for the park were a perimeter path, open greenspace, movable furniture and locating native trees and plants along edge on Maple Avenue. They will absorb sound and beautify the field. She also mentioned the 2018 town resolution for the Year of the Bird. It's cost effective and doable.

Amy McFeely said that some of her personal thoughts were to make sure to honor the farming legacy of the Hedlin Farms and the most important voices to listen to in this development are the voices of the neighborhood and also the voices of the farm. It can't impact the daily farming activities and families are the ones who are going to be using it most often. She also feels like there are many voices in the community that are not heard within the communication process, whether because of access to meeting times or because English not being their first language or they are not comfortable coming to a public forum. She is also encouraged reaching out to families who have kids with non-traditional needs who cannot access traditional play areas.

Councilmember Wohleb read a letter from Henri Hornby of 415 Whatcom Street. Hornby said that he would love for the town to consider one or two pickleball courts. The courts are much smaller than tennis courts and while there may not be a lot of players in the area, pickleball is the fastest-growing

sport in America and is easily learned by people of any age and body type. And it is also a low-cost sport. If courts were built here, he and other locals would be happy to teach the game.

Mike Ritchie of Finley Lane said that he's leaning more towards open space, because that can be used for T-ball fields. T-ball has removable bases and the T and doesn't require permanent structures so it can be a multi-use space. It's very difficult to find a baseball field to use since the school has their own sports teams which come first.

Jules Riske said that she was the author of the letter with lots of questions, and one of her questions had been about the park survey and she is excited that there will be a site-specific survey because she feels that people will respond differently when considering the park specifically. She would also like to help design the survey. She would like to see a longer list of options that she's picked up from people's responses to this process. Personally, she would like the park to be open space. Other open space in town doesn't feel like the community owns it- such as the school or waterfront park which doesn't work for sports. She can also see the benefit of having some development including open space such as climbing structures for all ages or space for dog walkers. Another option is a community garden. She has many questions about how the housing development will impact the park and she would like to see it connect well with it. She also wanted to know how the timing of development will impact the park and asked if there is any more information on the development will do that. Drainage was a concern she had for development since the park is the low end of the area. Are bathroom facilities required and what kind and cost is involved? What insurance is the town willing to hold for the park?

Administrator Thomas said there is very limited information on the design of the residential development at this point because it hasn't been done yet. There will be ten lots, primarily accessed off of Maple and it will not be a 55+ community. Thomas spoke to the buyer and they said what they come up with is going to make financial sense for them and what's going to sell and what's going to meet the needs of buyers. This will likely be young families, teachers, a variety of people. As to construction timing for the park, that is also something there is not a lot of information on at this point. His assumption was that the town will submit a grant application during the next cycle and thus are probably a couple of years out for construction. The residential development will likely be well under way by then. This is all speculation, however.

Thomas said that there will be a fence constructed between the development and the park. He thinks it's unlikely that there will be restroom facilities; they are expensive both to construct and maintain. There will be trashcans.

Amy McFeely asked if there was the possibility of the fence being some sort of greenspace like trees instead of a wooden fence. Thomas said that the fence was a requirement in the purchase and sale agreement, but that Landed Gentry would likely consider other things so long as the cost doesn't increase- the town would have to pick that up.

Dave Buchan said that at least in larger cities generally a park's designation would dictate what amenities are provided. A pocket park sounds more reasonable and he thinks this park wants to be a passive space with some play equipment and benches. The town and the school need to have a

conversation about the citizens having a say in what the district and the town do with respect to properties. Organized sports can reasonably occur on the school grounds with the appropriate agreements and designations. He is a little concerned about the idea of a garden space- people get possessive and there's the issue of vandalism. He thinks having another parks survey is great and will enable a design program and public participation in the process.

Mayor Hayes said that any town asset appears on the town's insurance. For drainage, any project has to have an engineered drainage plan. The potential buyer has agreed to put a sidewalk along length of the park along Maple Avenue all the way to Talbott Street. The parking diagram was done in conjunction with what the potential needs of both the developer and town would be and the layout the town thought would be most appropriate is adjacent to the farm. This can all change, of course.

Jules Riske said that she was mostly concerned that there might be insurance restrictions for certain uses of the park that the public might be unaware of that might direct how it was developed.

Crista Landworth said that she thought play structures used for special needs kids was a great idea. She has children herself and said that there are some play structures around town- John Hammer and Waterfront Park and the school, but there isn't a lot of open space for kids to play. The school has limitations on what kind of activities can be done there and where pets are allowed.

Susan Macek said that she would be happy to do some research on private grant funding for recreational ideas.

Kai Ottesen said he supported keeping the park open space as much as possible. He said that the tree planting and perimeter path were interesting ideas. He said that with the sidewalk there is an opportunity to shift the orientation of the park so that pedestrian access could be from the sidewalk, or at least, to have the option of a centralized entrance from Maple.

Catey Ritchie asked that the commission consider the way they engage the public in the park development process. Zoom is only as good as getting the message out to people and providing a time and place that will work for different folks. Maybe they could have a special Saturday meeting for people who have difficulty attending during the week. Also bringing engagement to where people are like putting a banner on the ballfield fence to let people know or fliers at the grocery store, etc. in addition to the survey and she would love to help with spreading the word.

Mayor Hayes suggested forming a citizens' committee and having at least one representative attend Park Commission meetings.

Ramon Hayes, speaking as a citizen of the La Conner community said that La Conner's issues are almost entirely spatial and any time you can serve multiple goals with one location, he views that as a win. Over the year, listening to public comment, one overarching idea has been the concept of open space, which he supports. He said he would be a strong advocate for the T-ball idea, since there are no permanent fixtures so it would preserve the open space, which would also allow a dog park to a certain degree. He

would personally like to see a batting cage that the kids could utilize and that would be a reminder of the legacy of the Hedlin family who let the ballfield be used for baseball for all of those years.

Park Commissioner Iversen noted that if you add up all of the land in La Conner dedicated to parks, it comes out to 16%.

Marylee Chamberlain said that she likes the idea of open space. It allows kids' imaginations go and people can get rested there and she thinks it honors the farmland and the space there.

Mary Wohleb said that she's impressed and excited about the level energy and interest in seeing what happens in this space and as a citizen, she too supports open space.

Catey Ritchie asked if there is an opportunity for the Park Commission to talk with the developer about what we're thinking about as a town when it comes to how that property gets developed and if there is a way for it to be visually beneficial to both sides. Administrator Thomas said that one way to achieve that would be a landscaping plan. Mayor Hayes he thought that timing would be a large impediment to that, but he liked the idea that Amy McFeely had of making the fence a green barrier. He said that the town is always interested in coordination and cooperation with the multiple developments happening. Mike Ritchie said that sometimes developers will contribute to a park if they can use that park space as a drainage field.

Mayor Hayes said that if the community thought a green barrier instead of a fence was a good idea, council would have to make the decision, but that is something the town could pursue. Crista Landworth asked if that would impact the use of T-ball. Catey Ritchie said it would depend on what they plant and the developer could cost out what they anticipate they would be spending on a fence and the plants that are actually put in could be integrated into the landscape design of the park. Ari Landworth said that he felt like they should maybe hold off on making decisions at this point. Commissioner Iversen said that it's not a time for decisions but for input and Parks also has to make some decisions.

Jules Riske said that on the drainage issue, they live north of the park and are slightly lower and when the park floods which happens maybe every other year, there's standing water for quite a while, they also have standing water, so as a homeowner, she would not want to have a larger housing development use that park as drainage space because it will impact down the line and also across the street. It would also impact the use of the park. Her hope is that the housing development will be connecting with the storm drain. Administrator Thomas said that La Conner has a storm system and development is obligated to connect to it.

Mayor Hayes said that he believes a green barrier is a worthy option to at least research.

Catey Ritchie said that the thought naming the park Hedlin Park is a lovely idea, but that maybe the town should ask the Hedlin family if that is something they would want. Mayor Hayes said that he spoke to the Hedlins early on, and the use of their name seemed to be met positively. Kai Ottesen asked if the Hedlins could have a little more time to talk about the name amongst themselves.

Councilmember Wohleb said that they have some really good input and at this point the information will go back to the Parks Commission. There is an effort to do some more outreach and they'll be discussing that and contacting Jules and Catey and designing a plan to get more information from a broader group of people. That will then go back to the parks commission to look at where do we go from here- a design charrette, etc? That's going to be something that's designed that they'll have to take a look at as a workshop or something to get feedback. This has been the first step in the process of gathering information gathering. Keep in mind that the outreach, the survey etc. takes a couple of months to design and get in the water bills etc. before they get back to all the data.

*The meeting adjourned at 7:43pm.*