

City rejects Platte Ridge agreement modification

Lee Stubbs
Editor

The troubled partnership between the City of Platte City and Platte County concerning the management of Platte Ridge Park appears in serious jeopardy.

At its meeting Monday night, the Platte City Parks and Recreation Board voted unanimously to reject an addendum to the agreement inked by the two parties in 2004. The addendum had been proposed by County officials before it granted an extension requested by the City Parks Department regarding completion of work at the park to address erosion and other maintenance issues.

Last week, at the Platte City Board of Aldermen meeting, City administrator Keith Moody suggested the Board table voting on the addendum. He said that the modification to the original agreement caught him by surprise and he also said City attorney Keith Hicklin had legal concerns about some of provisions of the addendum. At the Parks Board meeting Monday, Moody and Hicklin were present and shared those concerns with Parks Board members.

Most of the City's concern stems from provisions of the addendum which require the City Parks Board to submit all plans and budget expenditures for Platte Ridge Park for County approval.

"Mainly it was the language in it (the addendum)," Platte City Parks Director Dannie Stamper said.

"Basically, the new agreement had us doing everything they say and the County telling us exactly how to spend our money at the park. The Board felt like it couldn't operate that way."

Stamper said that he spoke with Platte County 1st District Commissioner Tom Pryor briefly Tuesday morning. Stamper said he is trying to arrange a meeting between himself, Moody, Mayor Dave Brooks, City Parks Board members and the County Commission to discuss the issue.

Platte County Presiding Commissioner Betty Knight said she was disappointed in the City action.

"I thought we were moving forward on this," she said. "Frankly, the only objective the County has is making sure that park is taken care of. The addendum was put together because we don't want to get to this point again. Also, I would think that it might be a help to the City and that they could utilize some of the County Parks' expertise in running the park."

Platte County Parks and Recreation director Brian Nowotny said he had not heard from any City officials as of Tuesday morning. He said that he was also disappointed in the City Parks Board's action.

"Obviously, we need to hear exactly what the City is going to do, but, as far as the rejection, I'm disappointed that the City apparently does not want to be a part of the future of the park," Nowotny said.

He added that he felt the Commission had been patient with the City and that the addendum was needed to ensure the City fulfilled its obligations at the park.

"I don't think at any point that we have been unreasonable in what we've asked," he said.

County officials have maintained for months that the City had failed to meet its maintenance responsibilities at the park. They pointed to erosion problems and safety issues as main concerns and issued a 90-day notice on Dec. 21 that it would terminate the agreement with the City if the problems were not addressed.

The City Parks Board maintained that some of the erosion problems were a result of improper County grading at the outset and made a counter-proposal to the County for the correction of the problems and who was going to pay for them. The County did not respond to the counter-offer and maintained it needed to see progress at the park.

In February, the City Parks Board voted to accept a \$120,000 loan from the City's general fund to pay for the grading work and other work at the park. Recently, grading work by Hill Brothers began at the park.

"We thought we had all of this stuff behind us when we agreed to fix what the County wanted us to fix," Stamper said. "It's unfortunate."

Moody said Tuesday that the essence of the original agreement had changed.

"I don't think there is any question that the City Parks Board is taking significant steps to address issues at the park, which would not even exist were it not for the City's willingness to partner with the County," he said. "But it appears that the partnership relationship is now one where the County is the landlord and the City the tenant."

Stamper said the City Parks Board has spent approximately \$1 million at the park in the last year-plus, including the building of two concession/restroom areas and a baseball-softball four-plex. The City Parks

board took a big hit last month when thieves broke into the park and stripped 14,000 feet of cooper wire from the lights at the four-plex. Insurance estimates for the loss topped \$40,000.

Stamper said that the City Parks Board was committed to doing the work at the park it said it would complete, but beyond that, he was unsure of the future.

“We’re pretty uncertain about what’s going to happen,” he said. “Technically, the County could kick us out now if they want to.”

No matter what happens, Stamper and Nowotny both said the soccer and baseball/softball programs would continue at the park, which is located just north of Tracy on Highway 371.

“We’ve said all along that if the City can’t manage the park, the County will be responsible,” Nowotny said. “One way or another, all those programs will take place.”

INCUMBENT ALDERMEN OUT

Lee Stubbs

Editor

Platte City residents voted for change on Tuesday — in a big way. Three Board of Aldermen incumbents were handily defeated by challengers in all three contested races. The landslide victories were forecast by some in light of the City’s recent failed annexation attempts and other controversial issues.

In Ward 1, Ron Stone, who has no public office experience, unseated incumbent Lee Roy Van Lew. Stone, 40, received 91 of 129 votes cast for 71 percent. Van Lew got 28 votes, 22 percent.

“I think it’s just great and I’m very excited,” Stone said. “I didn’t know how it would turn out, but I know there were a lot of people behind me and I thank them.”

Stone is the manager of Casey’s General Store in Platte City.

Tom Marquis got just seven percent of the vote.

In Ward 2, Andy Stanton received 135 votes — 72 percent — to Board president George McClintock’s 39 votes. Tony Paolillo, who withdrew from the race due to personal reasons, received 10 votes for 5 percent of the vote.

“It’ll be an interesting new beginning for the board,” Stanton said. “I’m looking forward to getting in there.”

Stanton is the longtime owner of Andy’s Foreign Cars in Platte City.

In Ward 3, Todd Sloan rolled to victory over longtime incumbent Jim Palmer by a tally of 99 votes to 39 votes. Sloan, 41, said his 71 percent to 28 percent victory was reflective of the citizenry’s wish for change.

“Obviously, people got out and voted for change,” he said.

Sloan said he thought that the annexation issue was just part of the reason for the result at the polls.

“From my home visits and from talking to people, I think it is a broad issue of people wanting more open, receptive government,” he said. “I get the overall feeling that citizens felt the City government had become detached from the people.”

Sloan is a self-employed real estate investor and is known in the city for his Sloan Rentals company. He also serves on the City’s planning and zoning commission, its TIF Commission and was a part of the City’s CIP Bond issue campaign a few years back.

McClintock, who served as Board president and was a central figure in the City’s pursuit of involuntary annexation, said he was not surprised by the outcome.

“Frankly, I was expecting it,” he said. “I think it was all about anti-annexation and the anti-annexation folks won.”

McClintock said he wished the new aldermen well, but was leery of what the future holds for Platte City.

“I’m sorry I lost, but I think I lost for all the right reasons,” he said. “I really believe that annexation is important to the City’s growth and so is the new supermarket. Without these things, I think the City will take a step back.”

Court will rule on cemetery relocation

Jeanette Browning

Assistant Editor

A hearing Friday before a Platte County judge will determine the fate of dozens interred in six family cemeteries, some dating prior to the Civil War, slated for relocation by the Kansas City Aviation Department.

Platte County Division I Judge Abe Shafer will hear a petition from the Kansas City Commercial Development Aviation Department at 9 a.m. April 6 on the disinterment and relocation of several cemeteries on airport property, including an African-American slave cemetery. The Aviation Department is clearing the land, located south and west of the Kansas City International Airport, to make way for a private racetrack now under development.

Most of the cemeteries in the proposed development area are well-documented, and complete with stone markers. These cemeteries include the Brightwell, Miller/Rixy, Kimsey, Samuel Hoy and Hoy cemeteries. As documented cemeteries now owned by the Aviation Department, these fall under section 214 of the Missouri Revised Statutes and may be moved by the Aviation Department. The graves must be disinterred, transported and reburied in compliance with other state laws governing cemeteries. All remains would be relocated to another cemetery located near Tiffany Springs Parkway, also on Aviation Department property.

The petition includes lists of the known inhabitants of the graves, whose remains are protected under state law. Also, in accordance with state statute, the Aviation Department plans to contact or has notified identifiable living relatives.

“We are practicing due diligence and working to be sensitive to the community,” said Judith O’Donnell, Aviation Development Department spokesperson. “We’re not touching anything there until we have a court order.”

While the relocation of graves is always a difficult process, the respectful relocation of one of the cemeteries is of particular concern to local historians Olin Miller and Shirley Kimsey — the slave cemetery located on the former Brightwell farm. As a slave cemetery, the graves are unmarked, and no one knows exactly how many people may be interred there. The exact location of the cemetery was even up for debate until earlier this year.

The Brightwell family has a long Platte County connection, and moved into the county in the 19th century from Spottsylvania County, Va. According to William Paxton’s “Annals of Platte County,” Ptolemy Brightwell moved to Platte County in 1856, and his son, R.T. Brightwell, came along in 1856 and was a businessman and justice of the peace in Parkville.

The family owned and operated the farm until sometime in the 1940s, so in the nearly 100 years of history in that area, it is unknown how many Brightwell-owned slaves or persons of slave descent may be buried in the small area not far from the Brightwell family cemetery. According to Kimsey and Miller, it’s been common knowledge for many years that a slave cemetery was located on the property, and Kimsey located it on a map of the area dated 1899 and later reproduced this map in her own 1982 account of the cemeteries of Platte County.

Kimsey said the cemetery was located in 2005, but heavy brush in the area didn’t allow for a thorough walkthrough. She believes 40-80 graves exist in the wooded area abutting a cornfield and fenceline. No stones with names mark the area, but several large red rocks, known in this area to have often been used as markers by slaves, dot the woods.

The speculation over the cemetery kicked into high gear in February when several area residents met in the field to locate the cemetery once and for all. The group, including Kimsey and Miller, walked the suspected area and finally located graves using the dowsing method, though the terrain and underbrush would not permit an extensive search. Dowsing, commonly known as “witching,” is a common method for determining the location of graves.

“This older practice has served the country for many years and has proven reliable in grave site location,” Miller said.

The question of the disposition of the slave cemetery heated up in mid-March, when Miller received notice Aviation Department-contracted archeologist Craig Sturdevant’s team would begin work on the slave cemetery March 14.

Sturdevant, a Jefferson City-based archeologist, has handled cemetery relocations at Lambert St. Louis International Airport. Such disinterment work covered under Statute 214, must follow specific stringent guidelines for recognized cemeteries.

The concerns started when it seemed Sturdevant would instead use a section of the less restrictive RSMO 194 concerning the discovery and removal of unmarked, undocumented graves.

“Since no one even knows who is buried in this cemetery, there is no notification of relatives possible,” Miller said. “In other words, it leaves this as an unprotected bit of our heritage about to be destroyed forever.”

A small group of local residents visited the cemetery March 14 to protest any potentially damaging work on the site, but no clearing crews showed up. O’Donnell said the Aviation Department had no further comment on the disinterment of the slave cemetery until after the Friday hearing.

Miller was also concerned about the methods that might be used to investigate the cemetery, saying when the site of the old family home was explored last fall the team used a backhoe. If such a method were used at the cemetery site it would destroy graves and make the witching process difficult or impossible.

Concerned he’d be unable to stop clearing crews from disturbing the area before the hearing, Miller asked the County for assistance in protecting the cemetery. Platte County Director of Administration Dana Babcock said the county could possibly protect the property under imminent domain, but that process could take years and a court process would be faster and less hassle.