

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON YOUTH SPORTS

April 2, 2024 at 6:30 PM

Chairman Morgan called the meeting to order.

The Clerk called the roll.

Present: Aldermen Morgan, Goonan, O'Neil, Vincent, Thomas

Messrs.: C. Telge, J. D'Onofrio, M. Gomez

1. Presentation by Christine Telge, Manchester School District Director of Athletics, regarding the impact of youth sports on school sports.

Christine Telge, Director of Athletics, stated good evening. I hope everybody has had a chance to review the presentation that we shared with Chairman Morgan last week. We were able to include an additional slide with some numbers concerning the question that was raised by Alderman O'Neil. That was the final slide of that presentation. For a quick summary of the slides that we were not able to talk about last time, in 2021 Athletics created a community focus group which was comprised of recreational partners as well as the Athletics Department. We all came together to address the issues regarding sports participation. Some of the ideas brought up in our focus group we have been able to implement over the last couple of years. Also, in the last six months the Athletics Department has run two student surveys. We have gathered information from our student population from those who participate and from those who do not participate in athletics. We have been able to use this information to help us as a district evolve, think creatively, and to mold new ways of communication to get our students to participate in athletics. As our presentation showed the last time we were here, the socio-economical changes in the City of Manchester as well as the new cultural differences, need to be dealt with by all the factions who provide athletic opportunities in the City of Manchester. We need to be mindful of budgetary constraints, and able to support our community partners to the best of our ability. We need our recreational partners to be successful in order for the athletics in the school district to be successful.

Alderman O'Neil stated thank you for the extra slide that had the information I asked for. I know you are going into a new budget year but are there any plans to add teams? If I remember reading it, 40% or 42% of the kids across the board got cut. My concern is this doesn't fall solely on the school district, but we need the school district to take a look at what they are doing. There are not the opportunities for kids that there once were. Alderman Morgan helped reestablish the west soccer program. CYO was once thriving. Are there any plans to address the amount of kids that got cut?

Ms. Telge stated there are no plans to address the amount of kids that got cut and to add any more opportunities for next year.

Alderman O'Neil asked is that based on any one factor or a couple of factors.

Ms. Telge replied I have to be honest. We are in a budget time right now where a variety of different departments are asking the Board of Mayor and Aldermen to provide the budgets they need. At this time, the school district budget did not have an increase for athletics for next year.

Alderman O'Neil stated I think the information you presented was very important but at the end of the day there are still a lot of kids left out. We, the city, school district, and non-profits, need to somehow get our arms around how we can create more opportunities. The two sports that seem to unite kids in this city and in many places, are soccer and basketball. We can find soccer fields. I learned all about futsal this past winter. I never knew anything about it. Gyms have become important for basketball and for futsal. That is something we need. We need to find out a way, and that is why I wrote that memo originally. We have to find out a way to strengthen our partnerships and what we can do. There are kids getting left out.

Ms. Telge stated we agree with you. Jordan and I have talked a lot about the Athletic Department for the City of Manchester's school district and are working the best we can with the resources that we have. We really need our recreational partners to succeed where the recreational piece comes in. Our job as athletic directors is to provide a competitive environment at the high school and middle school levels where teams can compete with peers from around the State of New Hampshire. We really need and we have shown that our elementary schools need more options. They need those options to be free or at a reduced cost. On the other end, our recreational partners who put these sports on and can start to build the skills that we need them to have to be able to compete for middle and high school, they also need the finances and the resources in order to survive right now. It is between a rock and a hard place. We have to support them as best we can, because they have to be able to provide the recreational piece. They have to start with the skills and the development. We have kids playing in middle school and on our high school teams who have no skill development. It is not an easy solution, but somehow we have to come together to brainstorm and be creative and support our recreational partners. The more we offer in middle school sports, the more we take away from those recreational partners. I have heard from them when it comes to softball and baseball saying you offer it in the middle school so they are not playing for us now. We have to be mindful of that, too. It is not an easy solution.

Alderman O'Neil stated I want to commend you for, again this is where partnerships become important, pointing out that many of our students are new to our country. There are language barriers with parents and registering them is a challenge. I know we have X number of people at the Health Department that speak many languages. There is a whole team. That may be one partnership that we can do. Sometimes I'm told that if it costs five dollars to do something, they won't register the child. That barrier of communication is important. What can we do to improve on that? The school district is a partner in this. I am not suggesting this is all on the school district.

Chairman Morgan stated Alderman O'Neil, you are spot on exactly with what the problem is right now. We are not offering enough opportunities for kids. The kids that try out for their respective school teams and don't make the team, where do they go? That is the issue. We need to work as a city to give them more opportunities. You are absolutely 100% right. That is really the number one thing we need to figure out and make happen.

Jordan D'Onofrio, Assistant Athletic Director, stated from my perspective being able to coach two sports, football and lacrosse, finding ways when I was a youth in Manchester

there was the PAL program and there were a variety of other programs. I wasn't a great high school basketball player, but I played in the CYO program. That allowed me to have a variety of options that helped me in my athletic career. I think coming together as a community, whether it is the school district or the Board of Aldermen or the rest of our community partners, to provide those opportunities to kids...that is the one thing I see as a coach; give these kids opportunities and they will take advantage of them. We have to step up on how we do these things. It has to be a group thing.

2. Overview of relationship between Parks & Recreation and youth sports, as well as the condition and use of athletic fields by Mark Gomez, Chief of Parks, Recreation and Cemetery.

Mark Gomez, Chief of Parks, Recreation and Cemetery, stated I'd like to start by describing the landscape for youth sports today and for the past several decades in Manchester. Essentially, the City of Manchester Parks and Rec provides the environment for youth sports to take place. That involves the athletic fields and the athletic courts where the private non-profit organizations then run the teams and the leagues. We have about 1,100 acres of park and school grounds that my division is responsible for maintaining. About 450 of those acres are what I would call non-wooded acres. They have open lawns, walkways, playgrounds, courts, athletic fields, 44 baseball and softball diamonds, 29 rectangular fields used for football, soccer, field hockey, lacrosse, etc. These areas, these 450 acres, require active routine maintenance. When you set aside the employees that we have dedicated to managing grounds at our cemeteries and you set aside the employees that we have dedicated to trees around the city, we are able to dedicate about 11 grounds maintenance positions to these 450 acres of park and school grounds. That means we have about one ground maintenance employee for every 40 acres. Best practice is one for every 12 acres. Minimum industry standard is one for every 20 acres. We are regularly operating with about half the personnel we need to maintain our athletic fields to the standard that we would all like to see. We are able to supplement these personnel to some extent during the warm weather months with seasonal employees. It still doesn't get us anywhere near to where we need to be. The model that has existed for quite some time in Manchester is to have a collaborative relationship with the private non-profit leagues, and they do assist with the maintenance of the athletic fields. How that shared responsibility looks varies from location to location and from league to league. Typically, the following arrangement is in place: Parks and Rec mows once a week, sometimes more often than that; we start up and blow-out irrigation systems; we repair irrigation systems during the season; we line fields; we occasionally spray fence lines; and we do trash removal. The leagues do day-to-day litter pickup; they are responsible for maintenance and security of their clubhouses; and the day-to-day field prep that might include going over the lines that we have already laid out on the field. They pay electrical bills for lights where those exist. That is the relationship that we have. That is how the athletic facilities are maintained. In summary, between cuts to Parks and Rec compounded over the past few decades and a reduction in volunteering among parents with a lot of these private, non-profit organizations, it has become more difficult to maintain athletic fields to the standard we would all like to see. I don't know to what extent that plays into reduced youth participation levels. It is a factor, and I want to make sure everyone on the committee was aware that is where we stand today with maintenance of athletic fields. I know that one of the proposals in front of this committee

is to have an umbrella organization for all youth sports in Manchester. As with any proposal, there are pros and cons to that. One of the potential benefits include standardization of rules. Those would be standards of behavior for coaches, parents, players, referees, that are the same across sports and leagues. Same rules of the game. We have some sports that are playing under different rules and that may impede the ability of different teams within the city to play one another. Standards for minimum playing times for kids is important. I would describe it as an unrealistic expectation among a lot of parents for several years that all of their children will grow up to be D-1 athletes. That is not realistic. It is an extremely small percentage of children that do so. I think giving everybody the opportunity to play is important. Another potential benefit is sharing of resources among the leagues. There is some economy of scale that could be realized. For example, shared bookkeepers, shared equipment and supplies across different leagues and teams. Finally, there is the potential to simplify the registration process. You would have one website or online portal for registering kids to compete and play on teams. There may be the ability to reduce travel time and costs through more competition between Manchester teams as a result of having a single organization with standard rules across the sports and the leagues. I have no doubt that there will be unintended consequences of moving in this direction. I don't pretend to know what those will be, but it is something to consider along with the benefits that I just delineated.

Alderman O'Neil stated I have been having discussions with various youth sports leagues. Are there memorandums of understanding that exist?

Mr. Gomez stated we are working on putting in writing a lot of the handshake agreements that have existed for decades between the city and various leagues. It is challenging because these were handshake agreements and not everybody's memory matches, especially after twenty or thirty years have passed. It is something that we need to have.

Alderman O'Neil asked are there some that exist that you could provide.

Mr. Gomez answered we have drafts, but we don't have any that are signed currently.

Alderman O'Neil stated something that has been pointed out to me on some of the buildings at the facilities is when they dug down, the city owns the buildings, not the leagues. The leagues were buying insurance for the buildings and everything. When they dig down, they don't own the building and they shouldn't be insuring them. They can insure the contents inside, but not the building itself.

Mr. Gomez stated I would say that generally speaking that is the direction we have been going in with the conversations with the leagues. Unless there are buildings that were built by the leagues themselves at some point in the past, then they are responsible for the interior of the building; any equipment, information technology or what-have-you that they might have inside the building. We maintain responsibility for the outside of the building. If there is an issue with the roof, that would probably be the city's to repair.

Alderman O'Neil stated that has come up in several of my conversations - roofs.

Mr. Gomez stated these are old buildings. There hasn't been a lot of money available to keep them in good shape. For some time, the leagues themselves probably patched things and did minor repairs and upkeep. They have fewer volunteers these days than in the past that are helping out with these items. I think more of them are coming to light and we are being asked as a city to do more to maintain these buildings.

Alderman O'Neil stated in the conversations I have had, the issue of field lighting comes up. My observations, and my son has played sports and I've officiated, in many cases the lighting is – through nobody's fault – is not up to a good standard. Therefore, they end up not being able to play on the field because the lighting is not very good. Do we have a list of what fields have been upgraded? Gill has, Memorial and West have, but do we have a list of what fields have had their lighting upgraded and what fields have lighting in general?

Mr. Gomez answered yes. Generally speaking, outside of the locations you mentioned every field we have that has lights ought to be upgraded. The costs, so you know, are going to depend on the location. Typically, we are looking at \$250,000 to do that.

Alderman O'Neil asked per field.

Mr. Gomez replied yes. It is expensive. I think it is one of the reasons it hasn't happened. There are some savings long-term by doing that. The newer LED lights cost less and the ongoing electricity bill associated with them would be less than the older lights. There is some return on investment, but there needs to be some significant capital at the beginning.

Alderman O'Neil asked is that including installing new aluminum poles or is it just upgrading if the wood poles are in good condition.

Mr. Gomez responded it depends on the spot. I'm giving you round numbers that reflect the quotes that we have seen for some of the fields where we have asked companies to give us an assessment for. In some cases, the poles need to be replaced because of their poor condition. In other cases, the existing poles can be used.

Alderman O'Neil stated I learned that for one particular program, it's a requirement nationally to have aluminum poles. I don't know if that is factual or not. Can we get a list of what facilities have lights and if there is any history of when they were last upgraded?

Chairman Morgan stated can you explain the 50/50 partnership with leagues. That is important because I think you have been doing a great job with that. Specifically, with South Little League. Alderman Burkush was involved with that and very helpful. Can you explain how that affects them and helps them?

Mr. Gomez stated a few years ago, we came forward with an idea to enter into 50/50 partnerships with youth athletic leagues that had long-time standing relationships with the City of Manchester. There were CIPs that were approved. I think it was two years ago with South Little League, which is now Manchester Little League. Also, North Little League, North Soccer, South Soccer, etc. These are great opportunities where the leagues came to us and said we would like to rebuild our field, or improve the

clubhouse, or put in new dugouts. We have been able to match dollar for dollar the investment they put into those locations. It is a great format for public-private partnership. It has been successful. The Mayor's proposed budget includes another \$200,000 in city monies and matches for league projects. Those will be identified assuming that budget moves forward. We will probably put out a RFP of some sort to the existing leagues and see what we get and choose the best projects. That is a successful model we have seen in the past few years. It is something that brings a lot of private dollars to improve our athletic facilities and I would like to see it continue.

Alderman O'Neil asked can we get a list of where those have happened and where there are discussions going on now. Again, when we talk about lighting there is no way the leagues have \$125,000 to put into upgrading lighting. One of them that you mentioned are fortunate they get in on charitable gaming. Many of them are not in on that. If we could get a list that might be something, especially for lighting, that we need to take a look at. Mark is right that there is a savings with more efficient lighting, even with the demand charge. Maybe we can become more of a player in the lighting improvements for them. They would get much more time to utilize the fields. That is a bit of a challenge for them now. If we get that list of where you've done it, that would be helpful.

Mr. Gomez stated absolutely.

Alderman Goonan stated I agree with Alderman O'Neil. I know where my kids play, they wait until 8 or 9 PM just to turn the lights on because they are so inefficient. Has there been a plan to incrementally update these fields?

Mr. Gomez stated I cannot say there has been a comprehensive plan put together with timelines and what needs to be done at year five, ten, or fifteen. It is something we could put together if there was an appetite for funding.

Alderman Goonan stated I think we should evaluate every single one of them to determine where we start with this. When you travel to other communities, it is obvious that we have neglected our parks for quite some time.

Mr. Gomez stated we can put something together.

Chairman Morgan stated Mark, thank you for coming and providing that. You are doing a great job with Parks. I appreciate that. A lot of leagues are benefiting from what you guys are doing. Thank you. I also want to thank Christine Telge and Jordan for being here as well with their presentation.

*There being no further business, on motion of **Alderman Vincent**, duly seconded by **Goonan**, it was voted to adjourn.*

A True Record. Attest.



Clerk of Committee