

HNA March 3 special meeting notes

The meeting was called to order by HNA President Coan Dillahunty at 7:05 pm. The group agreed to have the meeting recorded.

Background information presented by Coan Dillahunty:

- The land has been a golf course since 1899, became a city-run public course in 1951 and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
- Recently the city has been trying to resolve the course's finances. It has been losing money for at least the past 6 years. Other golf courses have also lost money. As a revenue-generating unit of the city, golf is expected to contribute to the bottom line, and City Council has asked PARD to offer a solution.
- The city contracted the National Golf Association to study all city courses, and NGF's 2019 report said Hancock needed \$700,000 to \$900,000 in improvements. Because of the shortfall and stated need for repairs/upgrades, PARD decided to open a Request for Proposal for bids from private concessionaires to take over operations.
- Under a concession agreement, the use of the course could change. It could be a different layout, a driving range, possibly with nets. Nothing's been decided but these things have been discussed.
- PARD is not closing the golf course or selling the land. The city is not considering building shops or homes there. Hancock Recreation Center is not going to change.
- PARD has stated it plans to continue some form of golf at the site and retain nonpaid, passive park uses (like the walking trail).
- Next steps: PARD is going to send out another survey in the near future, and it's important that everyone in the neighborhood fill it out.
- HNA will adopt a resolution to share with the city about how members think the course should be used in the future, based on people's current use and future priorities for the space. The resolution will be drafted with input from our own neighborhood-only poll and will be voted on at a future meeting.

Hancock Conservancy presentation

Speakers: Kristene Blackstone (HNA member) and Adam Sparks (HC founder, Cherrywood resident)

- The Hancock Conservancy exists to preserve green open space, make it more accessible and restore the environment around Waller Creek. People inside and outside Hancock neighborhood have been involved with HC, talking to people about what they envision for the space and cleaning up after the snow day.
- Adam's background: been in Austin since 2007, loves parks, no one is paying him to do this. He attended the stakeholder meeting in February 2020, where PARD presented the NGF study. This included three potential recommendations for the space, one of which was turning the space into a passive park (although this was not what NGF recommended). Adam wanted that option to be considered and so did other people at the meeting. He developed a survey that included the option of a park, and many respondents were interested. He has asked for PARD's next survey to include this question.
- Adam: We are here because the current model for golf is not sustainable. It's time to seek a long-term solution. Parks conservancies have raised millions of dollars for Austin

parks (Pease, Shoal Creek, Waller Creek/Waterloo, Barton Springs). Residents of several hundred nearby apartments could use this park.

- Four key asks: more time from the city to figure this out; no driving range; if the city moves forward with a concession agreement, make it a Request for Information rather than a Request for Proposal so the public could see it; if golf continues, expand existing passive park elements and restore the area along the creek.

Q&A with pre-submitted questions

Q. PARD's Community Parknerships program has several "configurations" or tiers of criteria for partnerships with private organizations. Tier A requires a 7-year history of collaboration with PARD and 5 years of philanthropic fundraising. Tier B requires a 3-year history of collaboration with PARD and 3 years of proven fundraising or the capacity to raise funds for a specific project. Tier C entities are "Friends of X Park" or "adopt-a-park" groups made primarily of volunteers. As conservancies, which of these criteria do you meet or propose to meet?

A. Tier B, we would raise money on behalf of the city and turn it over. We're getting set up to become a nonprofit or work under the umbrella of a larger group.

Q. Describe the park you envision for the Hancock space.

A. We will have a concept plan by the end of the month. It includes riparian restoration (like Willowbrook Reach in Cherrywood), tree canopy, great lawns, and Blackland Prairie restoration.

Q. How much would it cost to transform the existing golf course into that park, and how did you arrive at that figure?

A. Keep Austin Beautiful has a program with money and volunteers for the creek restoration. That could begin right away. Blackland Prairie restoration is expensive, so the lawn would be maintained as-is in phase 1, converted to Blackland Prairie in phase 2. We want to keep it as-is (no amenities), so initial estimate is \$200,000-\$400,000. Maintenance: \$100-150K to water, mow, maintain trails and empty trash.

Q. How would you raise that money?

A. Austin Parks Foundation has small grants, and we know private donors are interested.

Q. How long would it take?

A. We'll have more info soon with our park concept plan. Golf may turn a profit this year and could be continued for a few more years while we try to raise \$500K.

Q. Have you raised money yet?

A. No, we are working with Austin Community Foundation to become a subsidiary. We have donors lined up and want to raise money before the April Parks Board meeting.

Q. From a community engagement standpoint, what city officials have you met with?

A. Five City Council offices, Austin Parks Foundation, Pease Park Conservancy, Waterloo Greenway, park planners for Zilker, neighborhood associations, Parks Board members

Member/audience questions

Q. What environmental professionals or experts have you been in contact with to design this space? It is a requirement of being a PARD partner to have such a plan presented to the COA for review.

A. UT professors, Watershed Protection Department riparian restoration staff, Wildflower Center staff

Q. When will you be a 501c3?

A. Until it becomes a park we can't raise money. We want to be/create a subsidiary (under Austin Community Foundation) so it can hold the money in trust.

Q. How would the park affect parking in the neighborhoods adjacent to the park?

A. There would be parking in the lot, on 41st and on Peck.

Q. Have you considered the risk of the public park initiative to a citywide vote? The last time that happened in Hancock the other 9 holes became a shopping center. It would be terrible unintended consequence to lose the green space we have now to re-development.

A. We are fiercely against development and think other voters share that view.

Q. PARD said a passive park would incur a maintenance cost of \$200,000 a year, which would come not from GolfATX enterprise fund but from the General Fund which is counter to what Council has asked from PARD. How will you cover these immediate costs if it will take you several years to be an effective conservancy?

A. That estimate was rough. We've been asking what it would take to maintain park of this size and think it could be less than that.

Q. What funds for the riparian restoration funded by the existing organization have already been allocated to current projects?

A. We've been talking with the person who did Willowbrook Reach in Cherrywood, and expenses are low.

Hancock Golf Course Conservancy presentation

Speakers: Kevin McKinney and Andrew Dillon (HNA members), David Courtney (Hyde Park)

- Kevin's background: Has lived across from the golf course 26 years.
- Goal of the conservancy is to preserve the existing course and raise money on its behalf. It has been losing money, but in 2020 there were more than 20,000 paid rounds, even though the course was closed for two months because of Covid. It's had 11,000 rounds already this fiscal year, more than double the same timeframe last winter, without any additional promotion or the investment NGF says it needs. Golfers like it as it is. This trend of increased rounds will continue.
- We know people use the park for other things (including yoga). Hancock is a green space, passive park, modern golf learning facility, proven money maker and home for wildlife.
- Andrew's background: Has lived on 37th Street for 22 years and has started to golf. No one's against parks – Austin has 300 – but there are only six golf courses. Golf takes up a small percentage of land for parks. Hancock is historically significant and quaint/funky. It's not a country club. The numbers suggest the course hasn't been managed well. The course managers could invite people to play for free to get them started in the game. We could take a closer look at the hours that allow for non-golf activities at Hancock.
- David's background: Has lived in Hyde Park 20 years. We already have many parks (Shipe, Eastwoods, Patterson, Mueller etc.) nearby, and Hancock as a facility is also open to everyone who wants to pay to play there. We've been at this crossroads before, and in 2012 the will of the neighborhood was to keep the course. I'm willing to walk the course with anyone who wants to know more.

- Kevin: Watch the presentation PARD did with Hancock Conservancy March 16 to see how PARD staff are talking about this situation differently than they originally were.

Q&A with pre-submitted questions

Q. What strategies have you identified that could close the funding gap?

A. The financial numbers are already better right now. An obvious solution is food or beverage trucks. We could hold tournaments, “Friday night at the Hancock” movies with low-key acoustic unamplified music, fundraising events at the rec center.

Q. The city has said the Hancock Golf Course needs a number of upgrades. As regular golfers, what do you think is needed to improve or upgrade the course or the overall golf experience?

A. Very little needs to change. Open the pro shop, add food and beverage, golf carts for rent, pull carts. We can plant trees and do cleanups.

Q. Are you focused on maintaining the existing course layout, or are other golf activities, such as a pitch and putt or driving range, or a reconfigured course, acceptable options in your view?

A. We’d like it to remain a 9-hole course as it is. We are totally against a driving range.

Q. How much land do you believe can be used for passive activities (e.g., Frisbee throwing, yoga, croquet, volleyball) which would not interfere with the golf course as it is?

A. There is space in the southwest corner and along Red River; also, people can walk the cart paths early in the morning when there’s just a couple of golfers out, and it doesn’t cause problems. There are other spaces the whole community could benefit from, but it’s been hard to get that message through to management.

Q. Are you a 501c3?

A. We will be if we need to be; we expect to be approved for a sponsored fundraising account through Austin Parks Foundation.

Q. PARD’s Community Partnerships program has several “configurations” or tiers of criteria for partnerships with private organizations. Tier A requires a 7-year history of collaboration with PARD and 5 years of philanthropic fundraising. Tier B requires a 3-year history of collaboration with PARD and 3 years of proven fundraising or the capacity to raise funds for a specific project. Tier C entities are “Friends of X Park” or “adopt-a-park” groups made primarily of volunteers. As conservancies, which of these criteria do you meet or propose to meet?

A. We could immediately become a Tier C.

Q. From a community engagement standpoint, what city officials have you met with?

A. PARD, GolfATX, Austin Parks Foundation

Member/audience questions

Q. You said something earlier about not wanting people outside the neighborhood to have influence, what did that mean?

A. The HNA and people who live near the course should have the most say in how we want our neighborhood to be. People who have chosen to own homes here may have done so partly because they appreciate the course as it is.

Q. I found that I couldn’t really use Hancock as a park – non-golfers get kicked off. How would you increase revenue without losing access for nongolf uses?

A. These can coexist. [There was some disagreement about whether non-golfers are asked to leave.]

Q. Ideas for coexistence in light of the danger of people getting hit by golf balls?

A. Signage about where the danger spots are could help, and we (as HGCC) could help with that.

Q. Would fundraising events be open to all?

A. We wouldn't exclude people; we'd start by promoting it to the neighborhood.

Q. 2020 and 2021 are atypical times because of the pandemic/quarantine. It seems like the course will return to its regular financial profile when the pandemic subsides.

A. It's more popular than ever, and we have multiple major pro tournaments in Austin that get people inspired to play.

Coan remarked that he heard some points of agreement between the groups, namely that neither supports a driving range.

Coan adjourned the meeting at 8:21 pm.