

Notes from March 31 HNA special called meeting
Submitted by HNA Secretary Robyn Ross

HNA President Coan Dillahunty called the meeting to order at 7:04 pm and explained the process for the meeting.

Coan covered some background and timeline information:

PARD presented at our January 21 meeting.

The Hancock Conservancy and Hancock Golf Course Conservancy presented at a special March 3 meeting.

The city's Parks Board will meet April 27 to consider this issue, and HNA's goal is to provide a statement in advance of that meeting that reflects the neighborhood's priorities.

Coan said that the goal of the proposed statement is to stay in line with PARD's articulated goal of financial sustainability for golf and maintaining golf's historic significance at that location and that the statement draft is based on previously received feedback. He said the meeting is to find consensus on a collective statement to send to the Parks Board.

Coan said that once the group has reviewed and had a chance to ask questions about the existing components (in the agenda), there will be an opportunity to vote on elements to include in the final statement.

He then reviewed each component and explained the rationale behind it (e.g., golfers have said the opportunity to buy food and beverages would draw more people).

At 7:17 he opened the discussion to questions about the components.

Shannon Ratliff: Are open park days at odds with the fiscal solvency of golf if it takes away potential rounds?

Coan: They could be, that's why we're not prescribing how many.

Anna Thomas's iPad: What about some bushes to protect cars parked on the street – for 3b?

Coan added this as Component 2e, Encourage plantings of trees/bushes for pedestrian/vehicle safety and shade.

Sam: Can we add "We do not want a private golf developer concessionaire" to Component 3?

Coan asked Parks Committee Chair Carolyn Palaima to speak about concessions/RFPs.

Carolyn said there is a person on the Parks Board who specializes in Parks concessions who provided some context: A concession is a service contract designed to maintain/improve/operate an asset of the Parks department under PARD supervision. An RFP is a mechanism that a government agency has when it's stewarding public funds to have an open bid process for activities that don't normally fit under the expertise/skill set of PARD. These are present in other parks around town. Getting a food/beverage vendor would also require an RFP.

Andrew: Can we add "Formalize the relationship between HNA and the course managers to ensure community engagement"?

Coan: Would that be in the budget sustainability category or the continuation of non-golf spaces?

Andrew: Both.

Coan added Component 1h, Formalize a relationship between HNA and course managers to ensure community engagement.

Coan noted that the question of asking PARD to issue an RFI (request for information) rather than an RFP (request for proposal) had come up multiple times in the chat. He asked Parks Committee member Bart Whatley to speak about the difference between the two. Bart said that

RFIs are more common in cases of a complicated initiative outside the city's expertise, such as a theater going in on public land. But the city is familiar with the factors involved in working with vendors for food/beverage service or golf carts, so an RFI isn't needed in such cases. RFI = asking questions about how a vendor would operate, RFP = engaging with vendor to offer a service

AJ Lawrence: Why don't these components support turning the golf course into a park?

Coan: It's because that isn't the issue at hand with the Parks Board now; they're going to consider an RFP with the continuation of golf in mind. We want to shape that resolution, and offering ideas not in line with that will not shape the way the resolution moves forward. Those are ideas you can lobby the board for as an individual or organization.

Carolyn said that RFPs do not relinquish the city's oversight over the contractor.

Parks Committee member Linda Guerrero said the Parks Board has a concession committee that reviews and takes input from citizens to shape proposals.

Catharine Echols: As it is now, people often walk on the park after hours etc. Do we need to add something to make sure that there will continue to be public access to the course itself when not being actively used for golf?

Carolyn: There's been no indication PARD would restrict that. We address that in Component 3 by saying we don't want netting or fencing around golf course.

Coan asked if the group should specifically articulate that, and Carolyn said that would be opening a can of worms because the desire for access is understood, and we shouldn't bring attention to that issue.

There were a number of comments in the chat expressing support for adding this point.

AJ Lawrence: What if this doesn't reflect the views of majority of attendees in meeting? Doesn't restricting votes to a small number of statements not build consensus? A lot of things expressed by membership are not included in components being voted on today.

Coan: I appreciate your sentiment and others' as well but we're trying to get a statement to the Parks Board on the RFP elements.

AJ Lawrence: I disagree, but thank you.

There were a number of comments in the chat expressing opposition to a concession agreement, an RFP or vendor management of the golf course itself.

Coan explained the Google survey process.

Bart: There are a lot of comments on the different type of concessionaires or RFP, like one that may operate the whole golf course, vs one that may support the golf operations run by the city. Maybe we make a statement that HNA is only interested in vendors or an RFP that supports the overall golf operation that should be run directly by the city. It might help to make a statement that we're coming up with ideas to make course fiscally more solvent and perform better, but what we don't want is the complete absence of the City of Austin as far as general operations. A vendor or concessionaire could support golf operations (food truck, cart rental) but maybe we could add to what we DON'T want having a concessionaire take over operations of the whole course.

Comments indicated wide support for this idea, and it was added as Component 3d, Oppose a concessionaire taking over general operations of the golf course.

Carolyn said that once PARD puts forward recommendations to the Parks Board in April, we will know more about what's being put forward and HNA can have another meeting to address the recommendations.

Ella McCrea: What about adding the restoration of Waller Creek? That could be a shared goal for everyone; volunteers could remove invasive species and do some planting.

Coan said this was a good idea and asked Linda to share her thought on this.

Linda suggested we have someone from Watershed Protection speak to one of our meetings about this program and the creek. And Keep Austin Beautiful has someone in Hancock designated as a creek cleanup person. She said this idea should not go into a statement dealing primarily with budget.

Linda mentioned the option to write an individual letter to the Parks Board to express ideas like creek cleanups.

Someone asked a question about whether the form to vote on statement components will be sent to the whole membership. Coan said no, the idea was to have a meeting where the voting occurs.

Patricia Fontanals and Ella McCrea discussed Waller Creek cleanup efforts. Ella mentioned the need for open park days to facilitate volunteering at the creek. Patricia has organized volunteer days in the past but had a hard time getting volunteers. Patricia and Ella connected, and Carolyn suggested they could ask for this to go on a future meeting agenda.

CM Kathie Tovo was thanked for her attendance.

The meeting was ended at 8:01 pm.

Vote results are as follows:

Component 1a – Food/beverage vendors: Yes 57 / No 9 / Indifferent 7

Component 1b – Sunday clubhouse: Yes 44 / No 16 / Indifferent 13

Component 1c – Redesign problematic holes: Yes 31 / No 23 / Indifferent 19

Component 1d – Youth golf programs: Yes 56 / No 7 / Indifferent 10

Component 1e – Adult-beginner programs: Yes 49 / No 12 / Indifferent 12

Component 1f – Frisbee golf: Yes 57 / No 6 / Indifferent 10

Component 1g – Live music: Yes 64 / No 3 / Indifferent 6

Component 1h – Formalize a relationship between HNA and course managers to ensure community engagement: Yes 62 / No 7 / Indifferent 4

Component 2a – Preserve non-golf spaces: Yes 73 / No 0 / No 0

Component 2b – Continued collab with PARD, like on the trail: Yes 71 / No 2 / Indifferent 0

Component 2c – Explore enhancing community space: Yes 67 / No 2 / Indifferent 4

Component 2d – Non-golf open park days: Yes 40 / No 19 / Indifferent 14

Component 2f (there is no 2e) – Encourage plantings of trees/bushes for pedestrian/vehicle safety and shade: Yes 59 / No 1 / Indifferent 13

Component 3a – Oppose driving range: Yes 71 / No 2 / Indifferent 0

Component 3b – Oppose netting/fencing: Yes 71 / No 2 / Indifferent 0

Component 3c – Oppose night lighting: Yes 70 / No 2 / Indifferent 1

Component 3d – Oppose a concessionaire taking over general operations of the golf course: Yes 61 / No 6 / Indifferent 6