

County details Rahway park upgrades

By: **Cheryl Hehl** - Staff Writer

RAHWAY, NJ — Last week the county unveiled the proposed design plans for the upgrade and expansion of the sports area in Rahway River Park. However, those opposed to the \$4.5 million project were less than receptive, heckling the panel throughout the two-hour presentation.

The meeting, held at Hamilton Stage at Union County Performing Arts Center in Rahway, included a one-hour presentation on every facet of the design plans by an engineer from Neglia Engineering Associates, followed by an hour of two other officials responding to questions submitted in writing by the audience.

County Manager Al Faella moderated the presentation despite an unruly audience that continued to shout out questions, heckle and voice strong objections.

In order to understand why the presentation was met with such strong objections, one has to go back to October when the county announced they would be making upgrades to the track and soccer fields and Rahway officials seized the opportunity to make it a shared services venture.

The result was the county deciding they would pitch in \$2.6 million for a turf field and new lighting while the city would spend \$2.3 million for other additions that would enable the high school to once again have home football games.

The fact the high school football team has been unable to use Veterans Memorial Stadium because of flooding problems has weighed heavily in the upgraded design plan, which expands the sports area already in place at the park for a football field.

The proposed plan includes an eight-lane fenced track, score board, coaches box, turf field that can be used for various sporting events, bleachers for 1,200, coaches box, score board, storage, concession and restroom building and two pavilions.

But while both the county and city felt the expansion fit seamlessly into the existing footprint, not everyone was happy about the proposed plans.

Objectors quickly formed the Coalition to Save Historic Rahway River Park, mounting an all out effort to stop any project from moving forward.

The group, headed by Clark resident Kelly Tropeano, who lives immediately adjacent to the park, expressed concern about the project being much larger than officials initially

proposed, impact on the surrounding pristine natural park setting, danger to wildlife, lack of parking and safety issues for children.

In recent months objectors attended both county and city meetings, pressing for more information about the proposed plans and voicing concern about the county moving forward without a public presentation of the design plans. Officials explained there would be a public meeting to unveil the plans, when they were completed. That meeting was held July 1.

The panel explaining the proposed project included David Atkinson, a Neglia Engineering Associates engineer who worked on the design plan, Robert Barry, county legal counsel, and Andrew Moran, county public safety director.

Atkinson went through the layout of the park, explaining some of the environmental constraints his firm faced prior to the design phase. He noted the county-owned park, circular in design, had exits and entrances on St. George Avenue and Valley Road, and while the area was large, it was abutted by homes on the northeast side.

However, he pointed out these homes were buffered by a line of trees and the proposed upgrades, including lighting, would have little impact because the nearest house was 660-feet away.

The improvements, which include the eight-lane track, turf soccer and football field, baseball and softball fields in addition to several buildings, will all be located near the county pool facility and four tennis courts.

Atkinson explained that his engineering team evaluated all the environmental constraints and how design plans had to comply with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection guidelines. This included ensuring the project was not in a flood hazard or flood prone area.

“Our site is outside those areas, so there is no problem,” he said, adding the site also does not impact any wetlands areas, which would have restrictions. The area, he said, actually is on higher ground.

The issue of the impact any design plan would have on endangered animals in the park was also addressed, but Atkinson stressed this also was not found to be a problem.

The engineer did note that because a cluster of approximately six large trees encroached on the proposed eight-lane track, they would have to be removed because roots could cause problems.

“Unfortunately there will be some impact on trees, but for every tree we remove, we will put back two,” he said.

Atkinson explained that because the picnic area was used so heavily, they wanted to ensure it remained untouched. But, the design does include two open-air pavilions that will be tucked into that area. The engineer said the pavilions can be used by coaches and players for pre-game meetings and by the public for events and picnics.

Atkinson also addressed the actual sports area in detail, pointing out the eight-lane, 400-meter synthetic track would be red with white striping, which included side drains to catch runoff water.

The turf field will be made of the “standard” turf material, and striped in accordance with county standards. The field, Atkinson explained, will have an extensive runoff collection system beneath the surface.

“There will be perforated pipes at 20-foot intervals, laid within a bed of stone,” the engineer said, explaining these pipes will tie into an underground storm water collection area, which will ultimately discharge into the Rahway River.

The turf field and track will be enclosed by a four-foot high black vinyl coated chain-link fence. Atkinson said the fence is not erected to keep people out, but rather to keep unwanted recreational vehicles from damaging the turf field.

A “coaches box” is also included in the plan, and will be 19-feet off the ground. This, said Atkinson, will allow coaches to observe the game from a better vantage point.

The controversial issue of the bleachers was also brought up and clarified. Initially when the upgrades were announced there were plans for seating for 5,000, but Atkinson assured the audience that the plans included bleachers that accommodate just 1,200 people.

“There are two sets of bleachers, 10 rows high. One set, on the ‘home’ side will seat 800, while the ‘away’ side will seat 400,” he said.

A score board measuring 18-feet in width and 10.5-feet high will also be erected, along with four, 70-foot field lights, which is the standard height for athletic fields, Atkinson said, adding these lights will be “shielded” to keep glare away from the park and houses abutting the area.

The other buildings, including the 56-foot long by 25-foot wide concession and restroom building, will be more “rustic” in design, with stone on the lower portion of the facade. However, they are still fine tuning this design to ensure it ties with existing park buildings.

Moran spoke about the parking, noting this element is “nothing new for us.” He explained his department works in conjunction with county and local police departments to reduce traffic and parking issues.

“Together we have identified several satellite parking areas, if they are needed, which will shuttle people to the park,” he said, adding that there are 207 designated parking spaces in the park already, with 230 additional parking spaces available along Park Drive, which surrounds the park.

After the presentation, written questions posed by the public were presented to the panel, but the majority had already been addressed by Atkinson and Moran. There was one issue that was not, concerning the composition of the turf field itself.

Specifically, one audience member wanted to know what product would be used in the turf field, but Atkinson explained that because they were still in the design phase, a specific manufacturer had not been selected.

“I would say that we probably would use crumb rubber with a sand fill, which is standard turf material,” he said.

There also were other concerns about any rubber turf material running off into the river, but Atkinson explained this material would not reach the river because it would be caught in the drainage area.

Another question focused on why an environmental impact study had not been done.

“Nothing warranted an environmental impact study since we are altering an existing field,” he explained.

Robert Barry responded to a question regarding the next phase, noting that the next step would be for the scope and design plan to be presented to the freeholder board for their approval. Then a “use agreement” would be forged with Rahway and the plan submitted to the DEP.

After that, if the DEP required any further hearings, the public would have 30 days notice. Once the DEP gives its stamp of approval, then various phases of the project would be put out for public bidding.

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