

## Union County Residents Raise Voices and Hands in Opposition to Rahway River Park Changes



Scott Aruta asked for a show of hands from those who oppose the Union County and City of Rahway plan for the Rahway River Park.

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RAHWAY, NJ - Opponents of proposed changes to a track and field in Rahway River Park packed into a public hearing held at the Rahway Public Library on Tuesday night. The hearing was held, Union County attorney Robert Barry said, because two elements in the proposal are considered by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Green

Acres Program as a potential "change in recreational use" of the parkland.

Barry identified the two elements as the increase in track size from six lanes to eight lanes and the addition of a concession building:

According to Caryn Shinske, a public information officer with the Department of Environmental Protection, the construction of a storage building is not addressed in Green Acres rules, and thus "constitutes a change in use that requires a separate hearing."

"Additionally, a hearing is required if the project's size is more than a quarter acre of new and permanent disturbance, which the county indicated might be the case," Shinske said. "Given that possibility, it was suggested the county have a change in use hearing. The county has the final decision on whether to hold the hearing."

Shinske said the meeting was not a Green Acres hearing and did not require DEP attendance. “DEP will not render a decision on the project because approval is not required,” Shinske said.

Union County was represented by Barry, Assistant Counsel Kevin Campbell and Parks and Recreation Director Ronald Zuber. No Union County elected freeholders were present at the hearing.

David Atkinson of Neglia Engineering gave a brief overview of the project that includes an artificial turf multi-sport field and running track, a bleacher system for 1,200 spectators, lighting, a coaches’ box, picnic pavilions, and a building for concessions, restrooms and storage. Atkinson had provided extensive details of the project at a meeting held in July.

More than 100 residents from Rahway, Clark, Linden, Elizabeth, Winfield Park, Cranford, Colonia and beyond attended the meeting, as did representatives from the Sierra Club, the Rahway River Watershed Association, Preservation NJ and the Coalition to Save Historic Rahway Park. A representative from the latter group exhibited a petition that, she said, contained over 4,000 signatures of county residents who opposed the project.

Many in attendance took a turn at the microphone to implore the project be stopped, expressing a range of reasons, concerns and emotion. Speakers described the project as “a monstrosity,” “a theft of experience” and “abominable.”

The first speaker, Karen Attlesey of Winfield Park, expressed a frustration that was repeated by other speakers throughout the hours-long meeting.

“I would like to tell you 1,001 reasons why it [the proposed track and field] shouldn’t be there, but it would be for naught,” Attlesey said “I do believe that minds have been made up, regardless of public opinion. Shame on what you’re going to do to this park. But you already know that. You don’t care what I have to say. You don’t care what anybody else has to say.”

Objections were wide-ranging, touching on loss of use, destruction of the natural

landscaping, loss of trees, quality of life issues due to noise, lack of parking, pedestrian safety, project costs and taxation.

Several spoke of the selective nature of the improvement in that it catered only to organized sports. This limited use, they said, denied the general public access to the park specifically during games and more generally in the elimination of the park's natural appeal. They pointed to similar facilities in nearby Roselle and Linden as sufficient and negating the need for another county turf field facility.

Several speakers offered alternate uses for project funds including academic improvement in Rahway schools, increasing police resources to reduce Rahway crime rates, improving the park's lake, walking trails and landscaping and dredging the Rahway River to improve storm flow.

Opposition came from both long-time residents of the area and newcomers who said that one of the reasons they moved to the area was the natural park. Emotion ran high in many of the speakers, who begged and pleaded for a reconsideration of the plan.

"I pray you do something radical. Something really radical," said Al Gilchrist, a 71-year resident of Rahway. "Listen to the people."

Scott Aruta, a leader of the Coalition to Save Rahway Park group, asked for a show of hands by those in the audience who opposed the project, and an overwhelming majority of hands were raised. None were raised, however, when he asked for those who favored the project to do the same. "Once again we're at a public meeting where no one is here speaking for this," Aruta said. "We're all speaking against it."

"The Rahway school board will now become the private tenant of this space when it sees fit," Aruta said. "It will be able to use this space for all its sporting needs and effectively annex this park as a private sports complex and stadium as its own." He said the plan had been presented in a "false and misleading way" and sets a dangerous precedent in public land use.

"If this is an improvement on Rahway River Park then you believe God's

creation and Mother Nature did not do a good enough job,” James Keane of Clark said.

Barry said that a transcript of the meeting, as well as written objection received from the public will be forwarded to the DEP.

“I understand their [the public’s] concerns,” Barry said, “but a decision has been made by three different public entities that this is in the best interest of the general public. They all voted to approve it. It’s been approved by the Rahway Board of Education, the city council of the City of Rahway and by the Board of Chosen Freeholders of the county.”

Shinske, of the DEP, confirmed that the county must vote to approve its own proposal and that construction cannot begin within 90 days of the public hearing.

“This meeting was not for the benefit of the property or the opposition,” Coalition to Save Historic Rahway Park member Gerry Caprario said. “It was just procedural. It’s just a check in the box.”

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