

Outrage in Rahway over park upgrade

Residents turn out in high numbers for public meeting on Rahway River Park renovations

By: **Peter Fiorilla** - Staff Writer

RAHWAY, NJ — Not long into Rahway’s public hearing on Tuesday, Sept. 15, when residents spent five minutes each objecting to proposed Rahway River Park renovations, speaker Thomas Mulvihill ran out of time reading his prepared statements. Mulvihill, a Clark resident, had used up his allotted five minutes, so he asked if anyone else in the room wanted to finish the statements during their five minutes.

When the moderator, a visibly frustrated Robert Barry who was there to represent the Union County Counsel, told Mulvihill that his time was up and no one else could read his statements, the overflowing crowd — which lined the walls in a Rahway Public Library board room — voiced their disapproval.

“We don’t want to hear you, we want to hear him,” someone yelled from the back. That exchange set the tone for the heated, hours-long public hearing, held because proposed county renovations to Rahway River Park include a “change in recreational use,” according to the Department of Environmental Protection. The track at the 40-year-old sports complex will increase in size, from six lanes to eight, and a concession building will be built, if the plan is approved by the DEP.

Those features and the rest of the proposed renovations, including adding 1,200-seat bleachers, turf, 70-foot tall floodlights and more, were condemned by local residents, including many from the townships of Rahway and Clark. The general consensus was that the \$5 million project, which would be funded almost evenly by Rahway and the county, creates more problems than it solves.

The renovations would create a new home for Rahway High School athletics, many speakers admitted. But it would be at the cost of an historic public property, tax money that could be better spent elsewhere, and it would go against widespread public opinion, according to Gerry Caprirao, a Clark resident.

“It’s the owner of the property that’s responsible for the Green Acres. It’s the owner of the property for ensuring that they’re in compliance with voluntary programming, such as historic preservation. If you look around, you’re looking at the owners.

People who work for the county have a hard job balancing all of the interests of the people they’re representing,” said Caprirao. “But when you consistently see a number of people coming out in force, I think the comments that echo in every person is that ‘this is not the

will of the true owners of the property.”

Many of the speakers, including Caprirao, argued that Union County doesn't need another major stadium, and that Rahway residents are getting “a raw deal, paying for this twice,” when they don't necessarily want or need it. In the proposed plan, Union County is committing \$2.4 million on top of Rahway's \$2.3 million, in part because county officials believe that surrounding towns would benefit from a nearby athletic venue.

But at the public hearing, speakers questioned why more Union County officials — or anyone from the DEP — were not at the public hearing, which made the event seem like it was just procedural, said Caprirao. Rob Zuber, the Director of Union County Parks and Recreation, Barry, and Neglia engineer David Atkinson were among those at the hearing, listening to public comments.

Local residents were also concerned that the proposed renovations to Rahway River Park, which was designed by the Olmsted Brothers in 1925, would not be an upgrade for people who already use and love the park. The tax money that would be spent on the stadium changes, local residents argued, would be better spent elsewhere, including on Rahway Public Schools' academic programs.

“As far as a mere improvement or an upgrade, there has never been a large spectator facility. You've bandied about the words 'active recreation,' and this is only more active recreation. There will be 22 guys on the field doing active recreation, and 1,200 — possibly 5,000, as was originally proposed, and there is nothing stopping you from making another so-called upgrade — never has anything like that been right in the center,” said Rahway resident James Freeman, who is part of a grassroots group of residents trying to stop the project. “This is an historic Olmsted park, it is quite deliberate in the plan that when you look across the park you see all the way across it, there's nothing in the middle.”

The installation of the 1,200-seat bleachers, residents argued, would inevitably lead to traffic and congestion problems during athletic events, which would keep regular park-goers away and exclude them. There are currently 400 parking spots at Rahway River Park, according to Mulvihill, and while a satellite parking solution has been hinted at by the county, the current situation is untenable.

“It's like going to the mall at Christmas. Everyone's going to want to get a spot that's as close as possible to the stadium. The stadium has a capacity of 1,200 people. If two people come in a car, there will be 600 cars looking for a parking spot in the park. They will fill the park,” said Mulvihill. “If only 600 people come, there will be 300 cars, and they'll again, between them and the usual visitors, fill the park.”

If the parking lot at the park is full, it will be closed to all other users, added Mulvihill, and there is “no way the stadium is going to compensate for that.” For other users of the park, including bird watchers, hikers, nature enthusiasts, scientists and more, that would be a

major loss for the community, residents said.

“I’ve lived in Clark for 42 years. One of the amazing things I see about that park is that tranquility, no matter how many people are in it. Many times on a Sunday I’d just drive through the park, because of the amount of people who are there, the picnics, the older people, one generation with the other generation, children playing, people playing sports on the fields,” said Thomas Smith. “As I drive around, it’s amazing.”

Written comments about the stadium project may be directed to Assistant County Counsel Kevin Campbell: 908-527-4250, 10 Elizabethtown Plaza, Elizabeth, NJ, 07207. Copies of any written comments submitted on this proposal shall also be sent to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Green Acres Program, Bureau of Legal Services and Stewardship, Mail Code 501-01, 501 East State St., P.O. Box 420, Trenton, NJ 08625-0420.

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