

About 30 people attend park meeting to talk a

Sheila Vilvens, svilvens@communitypress.com 4 p.m. EST February 11, 2015



(Photo: Provided)

It was standing room only as about 30 residents filled the small meeting room of the Anderson Township Park District to talk about the future of W.M. Johnson Hills Park.

The park was not on the agenda for the Board of Park Commissioners monthly meeting, yet one-and-a-half hours were devoted to the topic under public comment. Some who spoke expressed an interest in seeing the park remain natural. Others expressed concerns about the JHP development plans that appear on the park district's website. Concerns about traffic, park ingress and egress, the location of trails and other amenities were also part of the Feb. 10 discussion.

Resident Dr. Bob Drake got things started by noting that he had collected 89 "valid signatures" on his petition to keep Johnson Hills Park in its current state. A couple more petitions remain out. Additionally, Drake shared highlights from his critique of a park district survey conducted as part of its Johnson Hills Park planning process. During its January meeting, the park board accepted Drake's offer to critique the survey.

"There were several major problems with the survey data," he noted. "Not the least of which, or most significant of which, was the lack of survey responses." The survey had 16 respondents representative of 13 families, he said. There were other technical problems as well which Drake briefly outlined.

Park board members have noted that the survey was just a small piece of the overall Johnson Hills Park planning process started in the early 2000s. Focus groups, small group and one-on-one meetings were an integral part of the process.

Board Member Angie Stocker said that there is a plan in place for Johnson Hills Park. It's been there for more than 10 years.

"There were surveys and meetings that took place," she said. "Plans were developed based on what the board thought at the time and input from the community at the time."

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There are no plans to do anything at Johnson Hills Park pending the outcome of an Environmental Protection Agency study of the area. Until those findings are made available, the park district can't do anything in regards to planning, she said.

The park district understands that when it finally receives guidance and clearance from the EPA, work can again move forward, Stocker said. Before that occurs, the park board will first go back to the community.

"We're not going to use an old plan that is 20 years old to make decisions from," she said.

This statement confused some residents noting that plans for Johnson Hills Park are on the park district's website. Nowhere on the website does it indicate that the park board will go back to the community to update the plans.

Resident Mike Cromer might have best summed up the thoughts of many in the room when he stated that Johnson Hills Park is amazing.

"Most of us enjoy the natural setting. Your work is done," he said.

At least two residents, including Lois Key, challenged the park board to follow the lead of the designers of Ault and Alms parks and the relatively new Milford Valley View Nature Preserve. Some places are beautiful and need to remain so, Key said.

"We need to be smart now. That's why I think we're all here. We don't want to come back 10 years from now and find it all gone."

Parks Executive Director Ken Kushner opened and closed his statements with an invitation to meet with all of the residents to continue discussing Johnson Hills Park. He again stated that Anderson Township Park District is an active park district, not passive and the Johnson Hills Park plans are for an active park that is passive in nature. Many people were engaged in development of the plans, which are needed to pursue grant dollars for development.

"We don't have all the money to make things happen," he said.

The plans in no way call for a passive park, which is consistent with what the property was prior to becoming a park.

"This was an active farm," Kushner said. "The main thing we should do is get together, have a meeting and go through the plans that are on the board."

Assistant Director Emily Armstrong is in the process of planning an open house/informational meeting for some time in March or April, when the weather is warmer. It will be an informational meeting to explain the phases of the plans.

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“The Board will continue to give thoughtful consideration to all opinions as they make their decisions on behalf of the entire community,” she said in an email. Residents who have shared opinions about Johnson Hills Park and residents in the community at large will be invited to the open house. For information, email Sheila Fehn, SFehn@AndersonParks.com

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