

# Despite dream deferred, Anderson parks had good year

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(Photo: File)

It was hailed as “the deal of a lifetime.”

In March 2015 when the Anderson Township Park District announced it had the opportunity to buy the RecPlex and surrounding land from the Beech Acres Parenting Center.

“We now have the possible chance to own that,” park district Executive Director Ken Kushner said at the time. “This is unbelievable what is being offered to the community by Beech Acres. They are offering us a chance, if the community wants this property, they are offering it to us.”

It was a deal that was two decades in the making, Park Board of Commissioners President Nadine Gelter said. Gelter was appointed to the board in 1997, making her the first woman to serve as a park commissioner. A long-term goal of the park board has been to own the RecPlex and surrounding land, she said. When the opportunity finally presented itself, park board members were thrilled, she said.

A survey was conducted to measure community support for the purchase of the Beech Acres property and RecPlex. More than 70 percent of those polled supported the notion. With positive community support, the park district placed a levy on the November ballot.

As spring transitioned to summer, many things changed. A new plan for the Beech Acres property was proposed and new parties interested – the Forest Hills School District, Anderson Township Board of Trustees and a developer. After many long meetings and talks, the park district pulled its levy from the ballot and relinquished its dream in favor of allowing the alternative plans to be vetted. These plans include construction of a new Anderson High School on the Beech Acres property and construction of a multi-use development on the current AHS plans. Talks among all interested parties continue.

In early December, Gelter said her understanding was that the park district would, at a minimum, be guaranteed six acres. The fate of the RecPlex remains uncertain. The township, which is buying the property and holding it until the vetting process is complete, has assured the park district that the RecPlex will remain open through this summer, she said.

The Beech Acres property is special to Gelter. It's special to the Park Board, she said. Regardless of what happens, Gelter said her goal is to preserve that land, specifically the beech tree grove that stands there.

While the final chapter for Beech Acres remains unwritten, the park district can celebrate several highlights from 2015.

Kellogg Park is now complete, Gelter said. This summer a playground was added to the park. When she was first appointed to the park board, Kellogg was nothing more than a couple of fields. It opened in 1989 and since that time has expanded to include a dog park, a concession/bathroom, pathways, and parking lot. The new playground includes climbers, stepping stones, rings, and slides.

“In my mind it's complete. To me, every park needs a playground and it's never had one,” she said.

Another highlight was the installation of a new playground at Riverside. The original playground was about 26-years-old and had been relocated from the park that was formerly on the Nagel Middle School site.

Also new in 2015, pickle ball courts opened in Clear Creek Park. There are six courts that will remain open year-round for public use.

The large pile of fill dirt that was located in Clear Creek Park was relocated this fall. It was used as fill for the new bike trail, Gelter said.

Despite the rocky road with Beech Acres Parenting Center property and its uncertain future, Gelter still counts it as a highlight of 2015.

Regardless of what happens, the land belongs to the tax payers, she said.

“I look at this as progress,” Gelter said. “It's not really our dream at all, but it's progress because we will at least own a part of it and eventually, my hope is to own all of it.”

Ownership might involve a joint partnership and that's fine, she said.

“We can share, as long as the beech grove is preserved, I’m fine,” Gelter said. She would also like to see a recreation facility remain on the site.

Looking ahead to next year, construction of the water play area at Juilfs Park is expected to be a highlight.

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