

Friends of Christopher Columbus Park
Monthly Meeting Minutes 05-14-13
Pilot House, Boston, MA

Meeting chaired by Joanne Hayes-Rines called to order at 6:43 pm. 52 people were in attendance.

Meeting recorded by Clerk, Audrey Tortolani.

Meeting notes from the previous meeting were distributed.

Joanne Hayes-Rines welcomed everyone to the meeting and let the attendees know the agenda would include reports on recent and upcoming events followed by a discussion on the homeless issue in the Christopher Columbus Park.

The Board members in attendance were introduced along with special guests including city councilors Sal LaMattina and Steve Murphy and Felix Arroyo (arrived at approximately 7:15). Representatives from the offices of City Councilor Ayanna Pressley and State Representative Aaron Michlewitz were also there along with Phil Orlandella from the Regional Review. Matt Conti of northendwaterfront.com videotaped the meeting.

I. Annual FOCCP election

The first order of business was to review the ballot for FOCCP Officers and Directors-at-Large. Audrey Tortolani let the group know a vote was not necessary because it was an uncontested ballot. A motion to accept the nominated Officers and Directors-at-Large was moved and seconded and those listed below are now in the following positions for this current year.

President: Joanne Hayes-Rines

Vice President: Ann Babbitt

Treasurer: Virginia Kimball

Clerk: Audrey Tortolani

Directors-at-Large: Meghan Denenberg & Joe Bono

II. Recent and Upcoming Event Reports

Joanne Hayes-Rines provided a brief overview of the FOCCP group. There are approximately 300 members of which 50 are very active and involved. There are multiple events this group coordinates throughout the year; some generate funds and other events either improve the Park or are focused on benefiting the community and bringing the neighborhood together.

Mayor Coffee Hour

Joanne Hayes-Rines let us know Mayor Menino's Neighborhood Coffee Hour will be held in the Christopher Columbus Park on Wednesday, May 15th from 9:30 - 10:30 am. All are welcome.

Memorial Day Musical Tribute

Joanne Hayes-Rines next introduced Brian Bishop, deputy commissioner the City of Boston's Veterans' Service office. He let us know of a concert in the Christopher Columbus Park to be held on Memorial Day, Monday, May 27th at 6:30pm. The concert will be a musical tribute to our heroes and will feature the Metropolitan Wind Symphony and the Boston City Singers.

Tot Lot Clean up

Meghan Denenberg, who chaired this event, provided an overview of this successful cleanup and fun family social in the park. The cleanup took place on Saturday, May 4th and there were about 100 people who participated. Boston Fire brought Engine 8 to the park and allowed the kids to shoot water into the Boston Harbor. There was great entertainment for the kids including Big Joe the Storyteller and face painting and crafts by NEMPAC and the team from Kindercare. Everyone enjoyed free pizza provided by Benevento's - thanks Joe Bono! Meghan also acknowledged the help from Warren at the Parks Department who saved the day by getting new sand at the last minute. Thanks were also given to Exhale who donated raffle prizes; the raffle sales generated \$376.00. The total cost for this cleanup / family social event was \$570. Pictures of the event were passed around at the meeting.

Tree Planting

Joanne Hayes-Rines announced 2 dwarf crab apple trees were purchased and planted on Monday, May 6th. Sunstone Hotel Investors donated \$5000 to cover the costs to replace 2 trees lost during the storm this winter. Joanne handed out pictures of the newly planted trees, now in full bloom, and informed us Schumacher planted them. There were about 25 FOCCP members present including Lori Lilly, owner of Tia's restaurant that abuts the park and Representative Aaron Michlewitz.

Urban Oasis Project

Joanne Hayes-Rines briefly gave a history of the area associated with this project. She informed us there was not enough money to finish the Christopher Columbus project back in early 2000 and so the circle area outside of the Marriott was created but there was no water provided to this area. The Urban Oasis Project's goal is to enhance this space and create a mini park within a park. When completed, the current circle will triple its size to about 1200 square feet and be a place of tranquility and also include pathways to different areas. Plantings and irrigation will be the primary focus. Joanne displayed the large poster of the project and let the group know as a result of perseverance and hard work, 2 grants have already been awarded to FOCCP for this project, one for \$10,000 (Blossom Fund) and a 2nd for \$20,000 (Beautify Boston Grant). The estimated total cost of the project is \$80,000. The FOCCP is planning to raise the balance of the money needed.

Patricia Sabbey and Joanne Hayes-Rines have been working with the Boston Parks Department; specifically Project Manager, Sherri Geldersma to create the Request for Proposal (RFP) for the services of a landscape architect. Patricia and Joanne have also been working with Parks Department Commissioner Toni Pollak. The goal is to have the project ribbon cutting ceremony during the Columbus Day celebration on October 14th and have the Mayor in attendance.

Harbor Sunset Cruise

Virginia Kimball, who is chairing this event, let us know the date for the Harbor Cruise is Wednesday, July 17th. Members and their guests are encouraged to attend this fun event. Ticket price will be \$45.00 and include wonderful food from the same caterer as last year, a great cruise around the harbor and a cash bar. Thank you to Boston Best Cruises for their support of this event. All proceeds from this fundraiser will go towards covering the costs of the Columbus Day event on October 14th.

4th of July Celebration

Laura Benevenuto and Kathleen Tedesco are co-chairs of this event. Laura informed us this celebration is scheduled for June 29th from 11:00 am - 3:00 pm and there will be lots of family activities. The very popular Uncle Sam on stilts, along with a magician, and T-Bone (show for children) will provide entertainment. Michele Brogan volunteered to contact NEMPAC to confirm their involvement as well. Laura is following up with Boston Fire to see if they can provide a fire engine. Similar to previous years, the event will begin with a parade around the park and all will be given small flags to carry. Raffle tickets will be sold

throughout the day. Laura encouraged all to volunteer on the day of the event to assist in organizing. The cost of the event is estimated at \$3500 for vendors, balloons etc.

Membership Update

Beverly Knight, chair of this committee, shared the status of the current membership drive. There is a 40% growth in membership over last year and the goal is to continue to communicate the value of membership so we can involve more people. Beverly announced a members-only welcome reception at the new Palm Restaurant. More details on this event will be provided in the near future.

Movies in the Park

Audrey Tortolani provided an update on the movies in the park to be shown each Sunday evening at dusk beginning on July 14th - August 18th. This year's movies have not been finalized yet but some recommendations from members include Toy Story, Top Gun and Karate Kid. Thank you to Joe Bono of Al Dente, Benevento's and Boston Pushcart for again sponsoring movie night at Christopher Columbus Park. They are very popular; often times with 100 plus people in attendance.

Trellis Lights

Joanne Hayes-Rines informed us the Trellis Lights and 14 trees are lighted from November - mid April each year and the cost to the FOCCP group is about \$35,000 per year and up to \$45,000 per year when the lights need to be replaced. Ford Cavallari and Joanne will be meeting with the electrician to see whether or not all of the blue lights will need to be replaced this year. Ford has sourced different LEDs which seem to be more durable and should last much longer than 3-4 years. The cost will be greater but, amortized over a longer period, should save money.

Joanne ended this reporting section of the meeting by saying the FOCCP group is always adding something new each year. Whether a new event in the park, trees or general improvement, this very active, all-volunteer group will continue to focus on enhancements to the Christopher Columbus Park. Joanne thanked Sal LaMattina for his continued support.

III. Homeless Issue in the Park

Joanne started this discussion by acknowledging we have all seen many changes in the area including the Big Dig and Greenway project. The homeless people are a constant and it was agreed over the years, they have moved around from place to place and are often found in parks around Boston.

Joanne shared a recent experience in the Christopher Columbus Park. A 30 year old homeless man was murdered, presumably by another homeless person, who pushed him off the chain link fence into the water. The father of victim contacted Joanne via email and asked about police presence at the scene. Joanne communicated her experience and assured him there were many officers involved and taking an active role in the investigation of what happened.

Joanne also shared another experience with the homeless in the Tot Lot last April, 2012. A father reported finding a razor blade and blood smeared in the tunnels. When Joanne heard about the incident, she went to the park and was dismayed to find nothing had been done and children were still playing in the Tot Lot. She closed down the Tot Lot and then made many phone calls to ensure the situation was addressed quickly and appropriately. The process included using pine sol to clean the area and during questioning, learned there was no protocol for handling this type of scenario.

Joanne also let the group know the FOCCP Horticulture committee regularly finds drug paraphernalia including used needles in the rose garden. The horticulture group now wears closed toe shoes and gloves when working in the garden.

Jim Greene, director of the emergency shelter commission was recognized at the meeting for attending the May 2012 FOCCP meeting to address this issue. Joanne has also attended some of his meetings. Joanne has spoken with Sgt Lema of A-1 and he has been very helpful; he is on speed dial. Sgt Lema has encouraged all members to call 911 each time they see a homeless person in the Tot Lot or doing something inappropriate in the park. Toni Pollak has also been very involved and had new spotlights put in the playground 5 weeks after the incident of razors and blood on the playground equipment. The spotlights are not always effective; Joanne experienced a scenario late one night where the homeless people had put up cardboard to block the light. Joanne acknowledged both Sgt Lema and Toni Pollack for their responsiveness. Joanne then opened the floor up to the councilors for comment.

Sal LaMattina thanked the FOCCP for their involvement with the park. He explained there is a 16 million per year budget for all the 200 plus parks in the City of Boston. 11million of the 16 million goes toward salaries and 5 million to maintenance. In summary, there are lots of homeless issues in Boston parks and not enough resources and money. He will be going to a hearing soon and will propose additional money to be allocated to the parks. He reminded us - if we see something, say something and call the Mayors hot line, 617 635-4300.

Steve Murphy spoke next and suggested dedicated patrols to go through the park at regular times. He also indicated the park rangers could be a resource and suggested having a park ranger assigned to Christopher Columbus Park. He indicated he appreciates all the FOCCP group does for the park.

Felix Arroyo spoke next and also thanked the FOCCP for their involvement in the park. He said it was one of the best parks in the city. He does think it is reasonable to ask for a police patrol in the area. He believes the issue is bigger than our park. There are both substance abuse and mental health issues affecting the homeless population. The city needs to deal with the root cause of the issue. He suggested a two prong approach; address the long term issue by dealing with the substance abuse and mental health issues and short term, all should employ the "see something, say something" mantra.

Jim Greene explained he has a staff of 3 and they do their best to address all issues including calls from homeless people and their families. Given the 200 plus parks in the city, Jim indicated it's difficult to monitor all parks. He indicated as recently as last year, there were about 80 homeless people staying at South Station and about 60 homeless people at North Station. Although he recognized there are substance abuse issues and needles being found in the rose garden, these may not always be the result of a homeless person doing drugs. Jim let us know the person who died in the park had not been seen by the outreach team.

Jim Greene let us know the Pine Street van has driven by the park the last 14 nights and have found 4 people in the park. The outreach programs are stretched thin but he advised us to keep them informed of any issues. He also let us know the homeless shelters are over capacity. He encouraged the group to let him know what can be done to improve communications. He welcomes the opportunity to work with us especially knowing the warmer weather will likely result in more homeless people in the park.

Joe, an attendee at the meeting who lives on Atlantic Ave, spoke about his concerns, particularly about the Tot Lot. He emphasized there is a need for a resolution "tomorrow" vs. short term. He asked, what can be done to ensure our kids don't find blood in the park and what can be done to keep the homeless people away?

A second person at the meeting spoke up about walking in the park with their grandchildren and hearing homeless people swearing. How can this be deterred? This person asked, what can be done today and how is money currently being spent? Sal LaMattina responded by saying he would speak with Captain Lee and Sgt Lema. He would advise them to check the Tot Lot each morning at 6:00 am.

Jeanine, a member of FOCCP spoke next. As a nurse, she indicated due to multiple syringes being found, she is not bringing her granddaughter to the Tot Lot. She asked, what can be done to protect the children? She suggested a higher fence around the Tot Lot and to

lock it at night. Sal LaMattina appeared open to this idea and indicated he will speak with Toni Pollak.

Joanne mentioned her trip to NYC to participate in a Parks conference. She specifically toured some of the NYC playgrounds and many were surrounded by wrought iron fences and locked at night. She suggested a 6 foot fenced in area could expand the current Tot Lot down to Atlantic Avenue and indicated it should be locked each evening from May through October.

Meghan Denenberg, reached out to the local mothers group and obtained their input on a fence around the Tot Lot. There were 27 mothers who provided their feedback. In general, they liked the idea and particularly if it would make the Tot Lot area larger. She read the feedback she received from one mother.

"I am beyond fed up with homeless people sleeping in the playground. Sorry to sound like an alarmist but by the end of last summer I had called 911 probably 5 times and every time I took the kids I would walk the entire playground looking for blood, feces, urine, needles, bottles (threw away one filled with urine once because I kept picturing any of our kids getting their hands on it, etc. before letting them play. I am a pretty chill person but after coming across many homeless people sleeping there I felt I have to be this extreme. There are pro's and con's to this but the homeless issue is only getting worse. I have not had good response from the police and have been asked to please go get very close to the person sleeping to make sure they are alive while holding my baby. I have had pretty negative experience trying to remove homeless people."

Meghan will forward a summary of the feedback she received from the mother's group to the city councilors. Sal LaMattina indicated he would support, at a city councilor hearing, a fenced in Tot Lot and locking it at night.

Michelle Brogan asked how the Boston Common handles homeless people. It was explained the police move the homeless people around. Also, because there are park rangers assigned to the Boston Common, they assist in addressing the issue.

Below is a summary of additional comments made during the meeting by those in attendance.

- Concern was expressed about homeless people in other areas outside of Christopher Columbus Park including the park across from Emack & Bolio's.
- Focus should be on keeping the Tot Lot safe; concern about the children.
- A police bike patrol in the park vs. just police cars was suggested.
- Surveillance cameras in the park were recommended.
- In response to the camera idea, Joanne said, we want to eliminate the issue vs. watch the issue.
- A representative from the Rose Kennedy Greenway mentioned they were dealing with the same issues and he would like to see more police presence.
- When asked if there was a special homeless unit as part of the police who take people to the shelters the response was yes, however, there are only 2 people. There is a need for more homeless shelters and more people focused on this issue.
- It was recommended to speak with Logan Airport about how their operations staff handles the homeless since they do a very good job.
- We need to focus on the Christopher Columbus Park Tot Lot; we want parents to feel safe and to keep the children safe.

Joanne emphasized we need to take action soon. She goes to the park most mornings now at 6:00 am to monitor the Tot Lot.

The previous months minutes were accepted with one change noted. Two Harbor Cruise tickets will be offered as a raffle prize at the 4th of July celebration in place of Gala tickets.

Meeting adjourned at 8:10 pm