

Colchester and Parks and Recreation

“Creating Community Through People, Parks and Programs”

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SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES

Colchester Parks & Recreation Commission

August 9, 2012

Town Hall

Meeting Room 2

6:00 PM

NANCY A. BRAY
TOWN CLERK

Nancy A. Bray

2012 AUG 10 PM 2:37

RECEIVED
COLCHESTER, CT

Members Present: C. Ferrante E. Kundahl, L. Dimock, L. Stephenson and M. Kennedy

Members Absent: S. O’Leary, N. Kaplan and J. Barr

Others Present: Cheryl Hancin, Amanda Herzog, Board of Selectman Liaison James Ford, Ryan Blessing, Co-Director Colchester Camp Shannon Tamosaitis, Co-Director Colchester Camp Kyle Tamosaitis, Colchester Camp Counselors, CIT Camp Members, other Camp Members, Citizens and Media

1. Call to Order – Vice Chairman Ferrante called the August 8, 2012 meeting to order at 6:05 p.m.

2. Discussion Regarding Summer Camp Concerns – Vice Chairman Ferrante read a letter that the board members received from Shannon and Kyle Tamosaitis, Co-Directors of the Colchester Camp Aboyer dated August 5, 2012 regarding Park & Recreation Day Camp Concerns/Submitted Correspondence (attachment 1). The letter expressed their concerns for the integrity and safety of the Colchester Park and Recreation Summer Camp program. Vice Chairman Ferrante proceeded to read correspondence that was received from Greg Cordova, Board of Selectman Liaison (attachment 2). G. Cordova apologized for not being present but was able to sit down with C. Hancin and First Selectman G. Schuster to discuss these issues with them. Vice Chairman Ferrante also received correspondence from First Selectman G. Schuster (attachment 2) which he proceeded to read. First Selectman Schuster apologized for not attending the meeting due to a prior commitment.

3. Citizens Comments – Many citizens voiced their concerns and opinions regarding the staff cuts that have taken place since the beginning of Summer Camp. They stated their concern for the safety of their children who attend camp due to the ratio of staff members per campers. They voiced their concern regarding their son/daughter who were hired as either CIT’s or camp counselors and attended training prior to the start of summer camp just to be told they were no longer needed. Citizens stated that their son/daughter turned down other job opportunities to accept the position as Camp counselor and were then dismissed at the beginning and throughout the weeks of summer camp taking place. Colchester citizens who have children that attend and work at camp Aboyer voiced their concerns regarding the inconsistency and negativity they feel has taken place this summer.

Many of the parents present stated how much their children who attend the camp love the staff members and the time they spend at the camp including all the programs. They stated it has been a very positive experience for their child which is why they are extremely concerned regarding the issues that have taken place this summer.

4. Possible Action Regarding Summer Camp Concerns – C. Hancin presented the board members with a document that shows the numbers of enrollment and staffing for week 8 of summer camp. She went on to explain how the staffing for summer camp is made each week. Enrollment fluctuates from week to week and each week they look at the numbers along with the staffing list for the following week and address what the staffing needs will be. When enrollment is higher they approve more staff. But a week with 75 enrollments would be fiscally irresponsible to approve the same level of staffing. Discussion continued regarding these concerns and issues. Vice Chairman Ferrante stated that decisions need to be made about what's best for the immediate future and more importantly they need to have a plan in place for next year. Communication in the future should be made very clear to the public and to anyone who is a potential employee of the camp basically giving them a clear picture of the potential risks and benefits of accepting a position with the camp. An informed decision needs to be made involving the people who are running the camp, Park & Recreation staff and the commission.

L. Stephenson **MOTIONED** to recommend adding a fifth staff member to Monday, Wednesday and Friday of week 8 of summer kinder camp. **SECONDED** by E. Kundahl. All members present voted in favor, **MOTION CARRIED**.

L. Dimock **MOTIONED** that the numbers for week 8 are what has been proposed by Anita on the document received with 125 campers and 22 staff members. **SECONDED** by M. Kennedy. All members present voted in favor, **MOTION CARRIED**.

L. Dimock **MOTIONED** to amend the last motion to include keeping the ratio of staff in accordance with the ratio of campers based on the forecast for week 8 including kinder camp. **SECONDED** by E. Kundahl. All members present voted in favor, **MOTION CARRIED**.

Vice Chairman Ferrante recommended that the commission revisits the structure and organization of the summer camp at the October/November meeting.

5. Adjournment – E. Kundahl **MOTIONED** to adjourn the meeting at 7:52pm. **SECONDED** by L. Stephenson. All members present voted in favor, **MOTION CARRIED**.

Attachments

- Letter Regarding Park & Recreation Day Camp Concerns (Attachment #1)
- Correspondence from Board of Selectman Liaison G. Cordova (Attachment #2)
- Correspondence from First Selectman G. Schuster (Attachment #3)

Note: This meeting was recorded by a digital audio recording system and is available through the Colchester First Selectman's office in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act.

Respectfully Submitted,



Gina Santos, Clerk

To: Colchester Park & Recreation Commission
Sean O'Leary, Chairman
Chris Ferrante, Vice-Chairman
Lynette Dimock, Secretary
Jody Barr, Member
Norm Kaplan, Member
Eric Kundahl, Member
Lynne Stephenson, Member
Melissa Kennedy, Member
Greg Cordova

FROM: Shannon Tamosaitis, Co Director, Colchester Camp Aboyer
Kyle Tamosaitis, Co Director, Colchester Camp Aboyer

RE: Park & Recreation Day Camp Concerns/Submitted Correspondence

DATE: August 5, 2012

If I may, I would like to bring the following issues to your attention based on our *deep* concern for the *integrity* and *safety* of the Colchester Park and Rec Summer Camp program as it exists today.

Let me introduce myself for those of you who don't already know me. I am Shannon Tamosaitis, lifelong resident of Colchester, and I have proudly served as Colchester Park & Rec's Summer Camp Director for the last seven years, having brought six years prior director experience to the department.

With your indulgence, I would like to brag just a little about our summer camp program. Over the course of the last seven years both my brother, Kyle Tamosaitis, who has served in the capacity of certified archery specialist, director and this year co-director of this program, have seen a continually progressive increase in enrollment from year to year serving as the leading source of income for this department. This did not happen by accident, rather, through our passionate desire to keep fresh the various programs and opportunities we provide to the children of Colchester and surrounding towns.

From year to year, we continually challenge our selves to bring not only interesting and fun programs to our campers, but educational and lifelong experiences and memories from their stay with us as well. Should you look at the 2012 summer camp calendar located on the park and recreation website, you will note the varied and extensive camp program, field trips, fun days, thematic days, camp guests, special events to educational visitors to name a few. It takes more than two months to create each calendar thinking of ideas throughout the year. You will note no two days are alike.

Parents continually share with us accolades and compliments regarding our program which vary from the many activities, field trips, etc., to the bond their child establishes with staff members to the comfort they feel in knowing their child is safe and secure under our leadership. One parent wrote a letter and stated that his child's four week camp experience was life-changing.

We pride ourselves on our successful reputation and the hard work and dedication it takes to maintain such a positive status throughout the community. Due to the increasing number of participants and the number of activities provided, the camp staff structure is given serious thought when determining the number of staff needed to effectively and safely implement this program.

It is critically important at this juncture to let you know of the rigorous interview process, training and the dedication to our program it takes to become a park and rec summer camp employee.

Just as important, it is worth noting that students do not apply for a position with the summer camp program simply to have a "summer job" and to earn a few dollars. They could apply at any daycare or fast food restaurant and earn more or equal to what they make now. Our application and interview process is extensive. As you know, most staff members begin as CIT (counselors in training) for two years in which they must pay to be a part of this program, before applying and being hired as a paid employee. Therefore, to say these dedicated people do not seek employment for the sole benefit of monetary gain, rather, for the experience and their desire to be with these children and to make a difference in their lives, would be a *major* understatement.

Once the extensive interview process is complete, we recommend and hire the most qualified of applicants. Each employee is then approved by the Recreation Director and First Selectman and upon being hired, receives a signed contract *securing their employment*.

All staff members annually receive hands on training to become mandated reporters through a DCF social worker. They receive 20 hours of intensive training and are provided with classes to become CPR and first aid certified. ***All training is mandatory for each and every staff member.*** Additionally, several fundraisers are held by staff employees who volunteer their personal time on week ends to raise money for scholarships. These scholarships provide needy families and children the opportunity to attend camp who would otherwise never be afforded this chance. These same employees volunteer their time each year at the annual tag sale on the green, whereby, they operate a booth to promote and boost enrollment in our camp.

Regardless of their title and/or role as a staff member, each member's worth to the success and safety of our program, having obtained training and being secure in the knowledge that they are vitally important to the triumph of our program, is

invaluable. Each member plays an intricate role to the overall achievements of both our campers and our program.

All staff members are dedicated to the progression of a child's core character development and the opportunity to explore who they are as children in a safe and engaging setting. Each staff member rises to the design of the camp curriculum to execute the detailed calendar.

Herein lies our grave concerns. On the second day of camp (June 26th, 2012), we were given a directive by the Recreation Director to cut staff members the following week by seven out of 17 employees (not including directors), out of "concern for budget numbers". Please keep in mind that weekly camp enrollment ranges anywhere from 77 to 110 campers plus.

While we empathize and understand the economic budget crisis that involves each and every one of us, it is important to note that this program is not only self-funding, however, turns a profit each year (as previous line item budget figures will concur).

However, ***of critical importance***, I expressed the following ***deep*** and ***sincere*** concerns with the recreation director regarding her order to cut our ***trained and newly hired camp staff*** down to cover the "standard" ***bare*** minimum of adult to children ratio of 1:10.

Please bear in mind that the "one" employee indicates a staff member 18 years of age and over. However, many of our camp staff are between the ages of 15 and 17. The recreation director included counselors, camp specialists and camp directors when calculating cuts to maintain this ratio. This means that specialists (Archery, Variety, Arts & Crafts, Nature, Sports & Games) and directors (myself and Kyle) would then have to supervise groups, instead of executing their own duties in their specialty areas as management staff, as stated above, she included both supervisory and director positions in the ratio numbers.

During that meeting I reiterated several times that by making these cuts, we no longer employed enough staff to **ensure** the safety of all participants attending our camp program. Of particular concern, is having the staff necessary as we supervise children over 52 acres of grounds, which we also share with the general public. Additionally, the effectiveness of both Kyle's and my position as co-directors is compromised because of these cuts. We struggle to effectively perform our duties by way of staff, camper, parent and program supervision, as it is now necessary for each of us to cover staff ***shortages***. I eagerly tried to work with the recreation director by offering less severe alternatives than the one she demanded.

I feel it is important to note that at no time were any of our offered compromises accepted. In fact, after her first request to cut seven positions, she also stated she approved the press release inviting seventh grade students to enroll in our camp program as well, while consistently cutting staff.

The above concerns/issues have also been brought to the first selectman's attention, as well as to the recreation director and recreation supervisor, from both Kyle and myself, as well as by numerous parents and media, to no avail, as continued weekly staff cut orders are given.

Parents are enrolling their children each week confident that their child will be safe and well supervised by the very same trained staff members we continually dismiss. Upon hearing of the staff cuts, a parent who is a recreational therapist expressed concerns regarding the implications of having staff irregularities and inconsistencies corresponding to camper /staff connections. He is not the only parent voicing concerns regarding cuts.

While I do not envy the position of the park and rec director having to meet the budgetary bottom line, no one can put a price on the most important element in running a camp program, and that is..... *the safety and welfare of all children enrolled* at all times.

By pulling out staff members from week to week, we continually compromise the mission, core value, continuity, reputation, and worst of all, the safety of our program and its campers. I cannot begin to express how challenging it is and continues to be to keep the overall moral of our staff positive and upbeat, never knowing when it will be their turn to loose days or weeks with our campers.

At the end of the meeting held by the recreation supervisor and director, I made one last attempt to plead for the existing staff based on the safety of our enrolled campers.

The recreation director responded, "Shannon, safety is a concern of mine too. But, the budget numbers are what I care about.....I don't care how you slice it and dice it, I don't care about staff, I care about the numbers."

That being said, I want to emphasize that the recreation director's priorities are in total contradiction to what I feel is invaluable to this summer camp program. That is the overall safety and success of the campers and the program itself.

We write this letter in the hope that these serious concerns will be addressed immediately as there are only two weeks left to the program this summer. Equally as important, is finding a satisfactory solution to these issues, ensuring our program's long-standing reputation, its future, and the safety of its campers for years to come.

With Utmost Respect,

Shannon and Kyle Tamosaitis

From: Greg Cordova (gecordova@comcast.net)
To: RecManager@colchesterct.gov;
Date: Thu, August 9, 2012 11:46:43 AM
Cc: prcomm@colchesterct.gov;
Subject: RE: Special Meeting Agenda

I am unable to make the meeting but have discussed the issue with Cheryl.

When I received the first email about staffing issues early in July, I was immediately concerned about how we would manage this without having repercussions going forward.

I was able to sit down with Cheryl and Gregg and discuss the issue with them. When Cheryl explained how she was working with the staff to minimize the impact, it sounded like it was going to work.

I'm sorry I was not at Mondays meeting for I would've been able to share this information then. Be that as it may, I again sat down with Cheryl yesterday to gain some more understanding of the issue.

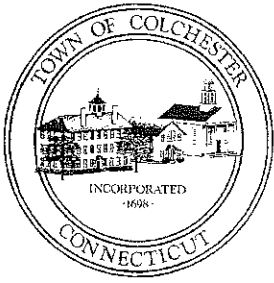
It appears that we don't have the same amount of campers as we did in past years, but we initially staffed for that amount. I am not in favor of under-staffing for the purposes of saving money and potentially risking safety.

On the other hand, I am also not in favor of wasting funds if it is not necessary.

Since we are coming to the close of this season, we should make every effort to resolve this issue with the understanding that we make better initial plans going forward. Cheryl has explained to me that she is well aware of how camps should be staffed and has also called other local towns to see what they do. I don't remember the specifics of those numbers, but I'm sure she will share them.

I am not going to tell people how to do their jobs since I am not in this field nor is that my responsibility, however, I will support the decision of the recreation manager until it is proven to me that her decision making is compromising our town citizens.

Thank you,
Greg Cordova



Town of Colchester, Connecticut

127 Norwich Avenue, Colchester, Connecticut 06415

Gregg Schuster, First Selectman

August 9, 2012

Vice Chairman Ferrante and Commission Members,

First, let me apologize for not being at this evening's meeting as I have a prior commitment. I understand an issue regarding staffing at summer camp has arisen. Throughout camp, Cheryl has kept me informed of the situation and her corrective actions. The problem seems to stem from optimistic projections regarding camp enrollment. When the actual enrollment turned out to be lower than projected, adjustments had to be made.

Safety of the participants is always of utmost importance to myself and the entire staff. We would never knowingly make any decision that would jeopardize the safety of others. After Cheryl explained the situation to me and I heard about the proposed ratio of counselors to participants, I was satisfied that we were adequately staffing camp. Based on that, I concurred with Cheryl's staffing adjustments. I certainly regret that any employee, regardless of age or career level, had a reduction in work hours or an elimination of their position. Unfortunately, this has become a sign of the times in this economy. Over the last few years, several positions in town have been impacted well beyond the camp staff.

I have read the letter brought to you by some staff members regarding this issue. Unfortunately, the letter contained a number of inaccurate statements. For instance, the statement that each employee "receives a signed contract securing their employment" is not true. The town does not have a contract with any employee, and certainly would never have one that secures their future employment. We do have contracts with six unions, but even those contracts recognize the right of the town to adjust staffing levels as it sees fit. It is unfortunate that staff members have brought inaccurate information to your commission and I apologize that it has occurred.

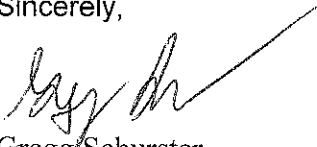
In terms of safety, I have seen no information which leads me to believe there is an issue. We seem to be maintaining a ratio of one counselor to five or six participants which is well within recommended guidelines. If this ratio is unsafe, then I would have serious concerns over having this program at all.

While I am certainly sympathetic to counselors who have been impacted, the town has a fiscal duty to manage the revenue and expenses of programs. As you know, the program fund has been in deficit for a while and the town budget is currently subsidizing the fund by \$40,000 per year. Although difficult at times, Cheryl is taking the necessary steps to bring this fund under control.

With only one week of camp left, there is really nothing that can be done at this point. At the conclusion of camp, perhaps it would be best if the commission work with Cheryl to plan for the 2013 summer camp. We certainly welcome the input and guidance of the commission as we all have the same goal of delivering a fiscally responsible, safe, and enjoyable program for all that wish to participate.

Thank you all for continuing to volunteer on the Parks and Recreation Commission and your willingness to deal with difficult issues such as this one.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gregg Schurster", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Gregg Schurster