

SUMMARY REPORT OF THE HISTORY OF THE FUNCTION OF
RECREATIONAL FACILITIES

THE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS RESPONSIBILITIES
IN PROVIDING RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES
IN THE CITY OF MILWAUKEE

At a recent Finance and Personal Committee meeting, questions were raised regarding ownership of recreational sites and the history of how the City of Milwaukee, is involved in the recreational facilities business.

This report is a summary of the historical relationship of recreational facilities in the County, the City of Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Public Schools.

It will summarize the relationship of each unit with each other and the entire community. The report will specifically focus on the relationship between the City of Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Public Schools and the role each plays in the City of Milwaukee's recreational facilities.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the City of Milwaukee was faced with the need to improve public services for its rapidly expanding urban population. It was at this time, in 1889 when the Milwaukee Board of Park Commissioners (City Park Board) was created along with the state legislature passing laws permitting the City of Milwaukee and it's park commission to purchase land with money raised from the sale of bonds, began operating parks. (Although the first public parkland in the city was donated in 1835 Zeidler Union Square).

The Milwaukee County Park Commission was organized under State law in 1907 and acquired it's first land in 1910.

In 1907, the School Board authorized use of the school buildings and grounds for social purposes and thereby enabled the school recreation program to begin.

Over the years the City system grew rapidly and, by the early 1930's it had expanded further than it's ability to fund and provide adequate maintenance. This shortage of funds was especially apparent when the federal work relief projects were started. The City Park Board could not take full advantage of the programs, as it did not have the funds required to purchase necessary materials.

In January of 1934 both the City of Milwaukee Common Council and the Milwaukee County Board each authorized the appointment of a fifteen-member citizen committees to study potential consolidation. These committees met both jointly and independently over a period of ten months.

In October of 1934 the County Board was given a report of their findings. The

report found that there was considerable duplication in functions, services and equipment. The City Forestry Department had specialized equipment which the County lacked and the County Park Commission had landscape architects on staff which was a deficiency at the City.

In December of 1934, the Milwaukee County Board adopted a resolution inviting various municipalities to transfer ownership of the parks to the County. After much discussion and many meetings to address the multitude of concerns which were raised, the City of Milwaukee put the issue to a referendum in April of 1936. The voters by about a 3 to 1 margin overwhelmingly favored the matter of consolidation.

Ultimately, on November 19, 1936 the Milwaukee County Board acted to accept the deeds to the city lands as well as personnel and equipment involved in park operations. As the result of the public referendum, ownership, operation and maintenance of the larger parks were transferred to Milwaukee County. The City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee Public Schools continued to provide programs and facilities at school playgrounds, recreation centers and smaller open spaces. The effective date of the consolidation was January 1, 1937.

The current city recreational facilities policy dates from 1926 with the adoption of Resolution # 31341 (copy attached) dated March 1, 1926, and Resolution # 58797 (copy attached) dated June 22, 1936 both adopted by the Common Council. Both resolutions were later superseded by Resolution File # 48-140-j (copy attached) adopted March 9, 1955; and subsequently amended by Resolution File # 48-140-n (copy attached) dated December 20, 1956. Earlier resolutions are notable since it formally established the cooperation agreement between the Common Council and the Board of School Directors.

Under the 1926 resolution, the Commissioner of Public Works was assigned the responsibility for all future construction, reconstruction, and equipment for playgrounds. Such playground development was to be funded by a city playground bond issue. Operating and maintenance expenses were budgeted under a Common Council Special Fund, the "Playground Operation Fund." The Board of School Directors was assigned the responsibility for operating the playgrounds and supervising all activities.

In their report to the Common Council dated February 10, 1953, the Special Committee recognized the separate, education-related goals of the School Board, and the distinct desire of the city to provide neighborhood recreational opportunities. They felt, however, that in the best interest of both bodies, and the public, they would be well served by continuing the existing policy, the city would be responsible for the development of playground facilities and the Board of School Directors for their operation and maintenance.

These formal playground policies were modified in 1956 on the recommendation of a "Special Committee on Policies Relating to Recreational Matters" composed of representatives of the Common Council, School Board and Milwaukee County. After careful review, they left intact the basic cooperative agreement between the City and the School Board on the development and maintenance of playground facilities, but

made substantive changes that further defined and elaborated on playground policies, such as the policy for land acquisition and compensation.

The rationale was that, unlike school athletic facilities which were primarily a part of the educational program, the playgrounds were designed to meet neighborhood recreational needs. Accordingly, the responsibility for their development should be the City's. Acknowledging overlapping uses, however, and the fact that the City was no longer involved in operating large-scale recreational programs, the Special Committee recommended that such playgrounds continue to be located at public school sites and be operated by the School Boards Division of Municipal Recreation. It was also felt that the arrangement was in the best interest of the taxpayers, since it avoided duplication of services, and constituted the most efficient allocation of resources.

The cooperative agreement outlined under the 1926 resolution has existed in substantially the same form to the present time. The 1955 resolution provided that future playground development be financed through the City's Capitol Improvements Program and specified that playground maintenance, as distinguished from reconstruction, be funded by the School Boards budget.

The exception to the "City Build—School Board Maintains" policy is the city wide network of 48 totlots and playlots and 11 green spaces totaling 69 acres, constructed and maintained by the Department of Public Works.

The Department of Public Works, has as its responsibility, the development, construction and reconstruction of the city's 36 recreation facilities. These facilities under the jurisdiction of Milwaukee Public Schools consist of 26 playfields and 10 playgrounds totaling 325 acres. The acquisition and development of these facilities were part of the City's first recreation program that began in 1926. Also included in this program was the acquisition and development of land for the expansion of existing school playgrounds. The City has been involved in the development of approximately 45 acres of school playgrounds that are in use today.

Today, city residents continue to receive public recreation services from the three units of government; Milwaukee County, the City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee Public Schools.

Over the past 30 years, funding for the construction and reconstruction of the city's recreation facilities has been from a number of sources. Besides the annual Capital Improvements Budget, other funding sources included Open Space/Legacy of Parks, Federal Open Space Program, Land & Water Conservation Fund, Economic Development Administration, Urban Park & Recreation Recovery Program, Community Development Block Grant Funds and Private Contributions. In the past several years there has been a lack of Federal funding appropriated for recreational facilities.

Attachments:

- Resolution #31341 Resolution to place playground development under the supervision and direction of the Commissioner of Public Works. (3/1/26)
- Resolution #58797 Resolution directing preparation of a playground program. (6/22/36)
- Res. #48-140 Resolution directing the Board of Public Land Commissioners of Public Works to bring the 1937 Playground Program up to date. (4/26/48) *
- Res. #48-140-b Resolution requesting plan for neighborhood parks throughout the city. (6/19/51) *
- Res. #48-140-c Resolution stating policy to be followed relative to flood lights for regulation baseball diamonds. (6/19/51) *
- Res. #48-140-d Resolution approving in principle unsupervised playgrounds, sometimes called "totlots" for small children. (6/19/51) *, (1/15/53, Report from Committee)
- Res. #48-140-e Resolution directing the Board of Public Land Commissioners to prepare resolutions to authorize acquisition of real estate for which money has been allocated in 1951. (6/19/51) *, (1/15/53, Report from Committee)
- Res. #48-140-f Resolution declaring policy relative to clearing buildings from land purchased for playgrounds. (6/19/51) *
- Res. #48-140-g Resolution requesting review of "1951 Playground Sites Survey and Program" by the Board of School Directors and the Milwaukee County Park Commission. (6/19/51) *
- Res. #48-140-h Resolution accepting the 1951 Playground Sites Survey and Program. (6/19/51) *
- Res. #48-140-j Resolution on policies relating to recreational matters as between the City of Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Board of School Directors. (3/9/55)

Attachments
cont'd.:

Res. #48-140-k	Amendment to Res. # 48-140-j. (2/21/56)
Res. #48-140-m	Amendment to Res. # 48-140-j. (11/27/56)
Res. #48-140-n	Amendment to Res. # 48-140-j. (12/26/56)
Res. #48-140-o	Amendment to Res. # 48-140-j. (3/19/57)

* = Referred to Committee

Total Budget for Recreational Facilities, 1967-2008

City of Milwaukee Children's Play Areas & Passive Areas
(Under City of Milwaukee Jurisdiction)

City of Milwaukee Playfields & Playgrounds
(Under Milwaukee Public Schools Jurisdiction)