

The Mayor and Council of the City of Abbeville and the Abbeville Parks and Recreation Board met in a joint special session on September 13, 2016, at 5:30 P.M., at the A. A. Comeaux Recreation Center located at 300 A. A. Comeaux Memorial Drive, Abbeville, Louisiana, with the Honorable Mark Piazza, Mayor presiding for the City of Abbeville and Honorable Anita Levy, Chairwoman presiding for the Abbeville Parks and Recreation Board.

City Council Members Present: Council Members Francis Plaisance, Mayor Pro-Tem, Brady Broussard, Jr., Wayne Landry, Joe Hardy and Francis Touchet, Jr.

Board Members Present: Anita Levy, James LeBlanc, Steve Delino, Chuck Sonnier and Lawrence Williams

Members Absent: None

Also Present: Ike Funderburk, City Attorney
Denise Mire, Interim Parks and Recreation Director
Brian Ford, Boys & Girls Club
Brian Suire
Raymond Frederick
Joe Cormier

Mayor Piazza asked Pastor Steve Delino to lead those in attendance in prayer. Mayor Piazza asked a Boy Scout who was in the audience to lead those in attendance in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mayor Piazza stated this is a brainstorming meeting to find direction for the Parks and Recreation Department. We took over the Parks and Recreation Department about 10 years ago. We had some very good directors and we have had some not so good directors. We want what is best for the kids and that is the bottom line. We want to make sure that the kids in Abbeville and surrounding area have a place to participate in sports and the comradery and learn what it is like to be a competitor and have some of those memories that we all experience while we played here. Most of you know that we have a private football league, Vermilion Football League (VFL), which takes care of the football program. He asked Denise Mire how many kids are registered for football. Denise stated they have a total of 7 teams from 6U to 13U. It is about 140 kids. This is less than last year. This year they will play some games here and they will go other places. Mayor Piazza stated we need to stay focused on baseball, softball and basketball and see what kind of direction we want to go into those fields. There is more to recreation than just organized sports. We have tennis, table tennis, skateboarding and all these other things we want to provide for our kids. Do we want to continue on the path that we have been going on which is having a full time recreation director or do we want to try something different? Do we want to go back to where we were with a private league to see if someone wants to take it over? There is some interest from the Boys and Girls Club and we have a representative here tonight. He opened the floor for discussion.

Councilman Brady Broussard, Jr. stated he is a product of this recreation program. From the time he was 6 until the age of 17 he played on these fields. He is sorry to face the realization

that what was then will not be now or in the future. Society has changed and we don't have the same interest in those leagues that we once had here. That is a proud history that this program had by producing players in professional baseball. It is something we can reflect upon but we are fooling ourselves if we say we will try to get there again because society itself is different today. He agrees with the Mayor's remarks that we should lay all cards on the table. We should hear all input and look at all options. Having the Boys and Girls Club here is something that is good. If there are organizations that are interested in our program we should have those discussions. His mind is wide open for the future. He hopes the best is not what we have now but in the future. He hopes we do it more cost effectively and wiser. The budget that the Mayor puts together has the same amount of money with much fewer kids now. We can't keep doing it like we are doing it. We would be far worse off without the dedicated Recreation Board members who are here at all times for our recreation department.

Councilman Francis Plaisance stated that what we are trying to do is so important to reach out to the kids in our community here that do not have the opportunity to go elsewhere. They are out there. Unfortunately, our first director passed away suddenly and we were beginning to move in the right direction. You drive just a few miles down to the east and you will see many kids playing there. There are a lot of kids playing in North Vermilion. We need to look at our local area. Councilman Plaisance is a product of the program too. He coached many years ago. We did have a lot of kids playing then. We have excellent facilities and with the recreation board, the City Council and the public putting our minds together to give us an idea what we could do to cultivate this area. This will keep these kids off the street. Hopefully we can leave here tonight with some sort of direction.

Councilman Joe Hardy stated it will take some dedication and hard work to try and get this done. We will have to find that special person.

Mr. James LeBlanc stated he has had kids in the program for 10 years. He has coached. He has seen the fall and rise. Some of it was really good. We need better coaches. Last year in baseball it was good but we needed more. We need better coaches who can mentor the kids better and work with the schools. We need another person here in the summer time to prepare the fields. It is being run pretty well so far in the office. What can we do to get the better coaches here?

Denise Mire stated that one person alone will not change the park. It is who you put behind you. One person alone cannot do it by themselves. We had avenues to get people to help. We had a group of kids that had a good time and they enjoyed our travel ball. We had fast pitch this year. She got support for that from a coach from Erath and from Lafayette. You need to find the right people.

Mr. Steve Delino stated the Mayor's comments were spot on about it's all about the kids. However we could do too many things and not do them well or we could look at what we do well and pull back and put more emphasis into those programs. If we have a coaches concern, maybe we have people who are willing to coach but they are not as knowledgeable about some of the games. Maybe we could reach out and have some type of clinic for each sport where we bring someone in that teaches some of our coaches some of the fundamentals. Councilman Broussard was spot on too that we are living in a different day than when we played. Kids have so many things that pull on them today that can be negative or positive. If the coaches are committed and understand the children more, in this day and age, it might need to come from some mentor that is more millennial that can think, speak, talk, train and mentor more like the culture of children that are participating. We probably have to come to the realization that due

to the high turnover in the position of director that without consistency you will not see a lot of participation. The breakthrough will lie in the consistency. We can build through consistency.

Mr. James LeBlanc stated we still have kids going to All Star.

Denise Mire stated back in the day it used to be just Abbeville. Now you are dealing with North Vermilion, Erath and others. People are leaving the local parks and going to Youngsville.

Mr. James LeBlanc stated a lot of it is discipline. Coaches do not understand how to deal with the discipline of the children. You get an All Star pitcher that does something wrong and he doesn't get disciplined. The other kid's parents get tired of it and they just don't come back. That is a lot of the problem. It goes on a lot.

Councilman Plaisance stated what baffles him is that he has visited other places. When he goes to Erath there are multiple fields that have kids playing baseball. At North Vermilion there are multiple fields playing baseball. In Abbeville, a City of 12,000 +, and we don't have that going on now. A lot of these kids are from here that are playing in those areas. He can remember not that long ago when we had baseball camps that were done by baseball stars. We had something that generated excitement for these kids and they had the opportunity to play. Now they are going different directions. Hopefully we can figure out what to do to draw these kids back. Leadership is one thing. It is important to have the right coaches and leadership. It can be done. We won't get back to what we were before many years ago but we can get back to some sort of program to focus on. We have the Babe Ruth program here and it is sanctioned here but we have no Babe Ruth teams around to play. That makes it difficult and we can't get another program because other places have them. That is if we have a program that is not successful and that there are no teams to play with then, that is not the direction we want to go in.

Mrs. Denise Mire stated we starting registering our kids with Pony this year so they can go and play teams in Kaplan, Erath, Delcambre and North Vermilion. When we tried registering Pony we weren't allowed to with Pony because QSA has Abbeville under its umbrella. We were blocked. It was already sanctioned to QSA. Mayor Piazza stated so that means we can't play with the Kaplan team if they are registered with Pony. Denise agreed. Mr. Brian Suire stated you have to go under QSA if you want to play Pony. Denise stated they called them and they were told the community was already registered. Mayor Piazza stated this is something that some of us are not familiar with. Why can't you just call up Kaplan and request to play a couple of games?

Ms. Anita Levy stated she know we had bad luck with the last couple of directors over here but she still feels we should try again with another director. You have all these baseball and football professional players in Abbeville that used to play professional sports that need to get involved with the kids. That would help the kids who want to play. Some kids just don't play sports. They are not into sports.

Mr. Chuck Sonnier stated to do what we want to do we need a staff that is more full time.

Councilman Touchet stated it takes a huge commitment. Whether it is in Abbeville or any other parish, you can go to St. Landry Parish or Lafayette Parish and these programs are shrinking because there is not a commitment from parents as there have been in the past. What do we do? Mr. James LeBlanc stated that is what the coaches do, they push away the parents. He was pushed away. Councilman Touchet stated even in high school, there is a lack of commitment

from parents. When there is a parent work day no one shows up. Let's think outside of the box. Do we need to join forces with others to be able to come to say whether it is the City of Abbeville or North Vermilion or it is somewhere else, can we join forces together to say that our kids are going to have a place to play and we might not be in charge. It cannot be from the City of Abbeville's standpoint, that we can do it by ourselves. We cannot increase the budget to hire several people.

Mrs. Denise Mire stated a lot of baseball is travel ball. One thing we can do is let them host tournaments here. We will have kids playing and we can do it in partnership. We get a little bit and they get a little bit. It would be almost like they are renting the field.

Councilman Touchet asked how many people were registered last year for baseball. Denise stated last year we had 131 and the year before we had 140.

Councilman Broussard stated this program is not the problem. The program is a result of what is happening in society. Abbeville High couldn't field a baseball team not long ago. No parental participation. It is not just what is happening here, it is happening all around us. We hear someone else say to partner and work with others so we will have more opportunities for our kids.

Mr. Brian Ford offered to be available to help. We service some of the same kids. There needs to be more conversation about this and our door is open for communication. We are not running a Park and Rec program now but there are other Boys and Girls Clubs throughout the country that run the Park and Rec programs in their community. This would be a first for our organization. We are used to partnering with different city groups. We serve about 500 kids per year.

Denise Mire stated we had 192 participants in basketball. It is set up with the Dale Brown Organization. It has to be a City run league. We had about 160 the previous year. Some kids like certain sports. It would also be better if we could play other kids. From what she understands, other parks are hurting too.

Councilman Touchet stated we are dividing instead of combining.

Mayor Piazza stated he doesn't know if the league organization that has been preventing this or if it is the independent recreational organizations in the different communities and cities that don't want to mix. Because to him what we should have and be promoting is a parish wide recreational program. You would still have your Abbeville kids but you would be playing other kids.

Mr. Raymond Frederick stated you have a broken system. You keep replacing your director. There is nothing steady so people go elsewhere. People are scared. Coaches want something steady. We don't have much money here they go for the money. You need to stay on course and give Denise a chance. Tonight this place should be full of people interested about the program but it is not.

Mayor Piazza stated we will not come to a conclusion tonight and we really should not tonight. We are here to hear these options and give it some serious consideration on what we should do.

Ms. Anita Levy stated when they have a Park and Recreation Board meeting Lawrence always says we have no parent participation. These kids get dropped off and the parents don't show up

at all. Mr. James LeBlanc stated when he coached there were some parents he never saw or met. Ms. Anita Levy stated the kids get dropped off in the morning. Some parents don't come back and pick up their children so the coaches have to bring them home.

Councilman Touchet stated we have been having a pretty consistent football program. Ask Rob Roy from day one when we started football and to where football is right now. They are losing participation. They still have consistency and have always had consistency and they are still losing kids. We are fighting an uphill battle. Rob Roy used to have a lot of kids. Denise Mire stated football is moving to travel football. Rayne and Crowley have left football.

Councilman Plaisance stated when they were growing up they barely had T.V. Now the kids have computers, I-pads and I-phones.

Mayor Piazza stated the kids that are serious about sports and can afford it, are going on those travel teams and all these big tournaments. The ones that are not all that serious about it and don't have the parental guidance or can't afford it get left behind.

Mr. Brian Suire stated it takes a lot for people to run a program. It takes dedication. He ran North Vermilion for four years and he was there every night. Our numbers have dropped in North Vermilion too. Director needs to love what they do, go out and mow grass, meet kids and get involved in the community. You can't sit behind a desk and tell others what you want to do. Everybody around here pays Pony. You can get a Pony sanction here. We did it at North Vermilion because they had blocked us too. With the right people here the program can come back. You have to give kids something to look forward to. Mayor Piazza asked why since we are sanctioned with Babe Ruth and everyone is Pony we can't play together. Mr. Suire said because the rules are different. If you don't play All Stars then you can play everybody.

Mr. Joe Cormier stated Abbeville is an old non-reproductive community. The reason you don't have the number of kids that you had 10 or 15 years ago is that when Tommy Picard left this place he took a majority of the kids with him. It was like a white flight. What Tommy Picard did for this program, he (Joe Cormier) will go down fighting for that. He brought many world series here. He did a great job for this program. Babe Ruth baseball is a community program. We have been here since 1954. He would like Babe Ruth Baseball and Cal Ripken Baseball to stay in this community. We are not a fly by night organization. This is the second oldest organization in the State of Louisiana. Maybe we can get North Vermilion to play Babe Ruth. It is a money deal. They get a \$200.00 bat and a \$100.00 glove and they think they will play in the majors. 1/10th of 1% of the kids make it to the big leagues. Yet you will sign up a kid for \$1,200.00 per kid to play four or five innings. They will not be any better. Only one kid made it to the majors, Lloyd Bessard. Mr. Cormier coached a lot of doctors, lawyers, firemen and policemen. That's what counts. He was here with the nine world series. Abbeville is an old community. You won't have the enthusiasm that you had before. Councilman Touchet asked if we don't have the numbers how do we survive. Mr. Cormier stated you talk to North Vermilion and Kaplan to see if they would come over to Babe Ruth Baseball. Mayor Piazza asked if we have a Babe Ruth representative. Mr. Cormier stated we have Mike Markins. We asked him to speak to North Vermilion. Mr. Brian Suire stated their board decided to stay with Pony because no one else played Babe Ruth Baseball. Mrs. Denise Mire stated all our teams played against each other. Mayor Piazza asked if there are other leagues. Mr. Cormier stated you have USSSA. Mr. Steve Delino asked what does Babe Ruth offer. Mr. Cormier stated with Pony you can pick up anywhere to play and with Babe Ruth you have boundaries. You have to stay in those boundaries. There is a study being conducted right now to extend boundaries. Mr. Delino if other organizations are losing kids too? Mr. Cormier stated other leagues are losing kids too.

They are being outpriced by travel teams. Mrs. Denise Mire asked if we could register both Babe Ruth and Pony. Mr. Cormier stated you have to play at least 10 league games to qualify for district or state. Mr. James LeBlanc stated that causes a major problem. We have had so much rain the last couple of years that we were forced to play. He lost kids. There was dancing going on a certain time. It is at the end of the year in May and you have so many things going on and we are told that we have to play. He had only four players. Babe Ruth did not destroy this place. It had to do with coaches. It happened during the Picard time. He did not leave us with things that were good. His coaches were not all that great. He might have had four or five that he took with him but there were a lot of hateful things and arguments between umpires. It was ridiculous and it wasn't about the kids. He was there and saw it fall. It's about coaching and the kids. How do we get the kids to come? It will take family to bring in their kids and relatives.

Councilman Landry stated he needs somebody to go in his community to bring the kids. Somebody has to go down there and knock on doors and talk to the parents. Somebody needs to go get them and bring them here. Mrs. Denise Mire stated they do go door to door but kids are not as interested as they used to be. As a community we need to figure what is going on in the community. We need to let people use our facilities.

Councilman Touchet stated we cannot outsource basketball because of the commitment to the Dale Brown Organization. Do we want to outsource baseball? If we do, it will not be the City Council's decision if we stay with Babe Ruth or Pony. If we run the league, we have to decide if we will stay with Babe Ruth or go with Pony. If we stay with Babe Ruth we have to see if there is a commitment from those two organizations to see if they will do it. He doubts they will. There has to be a decision to move to something where there are more opportunities for our kids to play.

Mr. Steve Delino stated you have to put your full weight behind the good things. It needs to be celebrated about what is happening instead of focusing on what is not happening.

Mr. James LeBlanc stated with Dale Brown every kids has to play for a certain amount of time. That ruled helped a lot. That should be the rule for all sports. Mrs. Denise Mire stated that where her children play, that is the rule because the director makes it a rule. Every kid should get an opportunity to play.

Ms. Anita Levy stated we should have a free clinic for the kids.

Mr. Lawrence Williams stated the parents can't afford for their kids to play. We are the cheapest football program. We offer a lot of things but our numbers are down. We have a lot of competition in this league. Some kids don't want to get hit. We should do a fundraiser to cover the cost of registration. Mrs. Denise Mire stated Lafayette Parish allows a certain number of kids to play for free.

Councilman Touchet stated it is a popularity thing. Kids want to play where their friends are playing.

Mayor Piazza stated we can't pass a tax of any kind. They had a tax in the past that supported this program. That tax that closed this building, got voted down twice. We don't have one nickel in sales tax or property tax that goes to this program. Everything that goes into this program comes out of the general fund. The general fund is the same fund that has to pay our firemen and policemen. We don't just have this money laying around to put into this program.

We are barely scrapping enough to give our employees raises every year. That is a big problem. We don't have money to sink in this program to be able to let all the kids play for free. He would love for all the kids to be able to play for free. If we had a tax that supported the program, we probably would. It has been tried twice and failed. It closed this building. If it were not for the Boys and Girls Club, this building would still be closed. Councilman Landry is in favor for trying to get a tax again. Councilman Touchet stated he is not in favor of that. Mayor Piazza stated when the Police Jury even mentioned a tax to build a levy to save us from flooding, they got a big no. The public was not interested in voting to save themselves from a tidal surge. That is the message we got. We just had the Council on Aging propose a tax to the Police Jury to help our elderly and they got a big no again from the public. The message from the public was no taxes. Our budget for the Park Department is \$200,000 per year but that includes electricity. We provide electricity for everyone to use. Mr. Steve Delino stated we need to find people and businesses that are interested in getting involved. Councilman Plaisance stated we had two concerts in the past at Sellers Field and we made a lot of money. Look into an annual concert at Sellers Field

Mayor Piazza stated we are not here tonight to make decisions. The Boys and Girls Club is the only group that has shown some interest in our program. We don't know if we will outsource it because we don't have anyone interested. We will continue with basketball as it has been since it has to be a City run league. We can meet again in another two or three weeks. If there are interested parties then we will invite them to submit proposals. We are trying to think outside the box here.

There being no further business to discuss, Mayor Piazza declared this meeting adjourned.

ATTEST:

APPROVE:

Kathleen S. Faulk
Secretary-Treasurer

Mark Piazza
Mayor