

New Providence may sell park to county for \$1

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New Providence wants to improve Oakwood Park. Community officials complain that the basketball court sits in a parking lot, the fields are riddled with potholes and limited parking puts children at risk. They hope a new owner can do the job.

The borough proposes to sell Oakwood Park, as well as a strip of land that abuts the Passaic River, to Union County for \$1. The county would then spend approximately \$3.5 million from its Open Space, Recreation & Historic Preservation Trust Fund, to renovate the park. The land along the river would remain undeveloped, with minor improvements to the landscaping and walking trails.



Alexandra Pais/NJLNSThe

current playground at Oakwood Park, which Union County may purchase from New Providence for \$1.

The county freeholders held a meeting in New Providence last week to watch a presentation detailing the borough's plan and listen to public comment on the issue.

Hundreds of people -- both delighted and angry -- packed into the borough's council chambers to have their say.

"It's the scope and intensity that might not be appropriate," said Brian Flanagan, who serves on the borough's planning board, during the meeting. Flanagan fears the renovations would attract more traffic to the park, which sits in a residential neighborhood.

Laine Maurer objected to the plan on different grounds. "I am opposed to gifting Oakwood Park to the county," she said. "I believe once you give up ownership of land, we can't get it back."

Other residents felt differently.

"Get it done for the children of New Providence," Bill Harvey told the freeholders.

Harvey, the football commissioner for the borough's Police Athletic League, called the current facilities a safety hazard. "The field has potholes and undulates and rolls up and down hills," he said about the multi-purpose field in a telephone interview Friday.

Harvey also called the parking situation a problem. "There's going to be an injury because there's not

enough off-the-street parking," he said.

Both of those issues would be addressed in the proposed renovations. Oakwood Park, located near Commonwealth Avenue, currently houses bocce, volleyball and basketball facilities, a picnic area, playground, horseshoe pit and fields used for football, soccer and baseball. The renovations include plans to line those existing fields with synthetic turf and build more parking lots, new bathrooms, a field house with a concession stand and walking trails.

"There's lots of problems at Oakwood Park. I don't think it has been touched in decades," said Tzu-Lin Toner, New Providence's Director of Community Activities. Toner said residents have a misconception that the borough wants the renovations to increase demand. The renovations are needed, she said, to meet current demand. "It would be a shame if we don't take this gift," she said.

Under the Kids Recreation Trust Fund grant, a program under the umbrella of the Open Space, Recreation & Historic Preservation Trust Fund, the county can award money to municipalities for improvements to recreation. Money from that grant, which requires the municipality to contribute the same amount of money to the project, funded the initial plans for the park's redevelopment in 2007. At Wednesday's meeting, county officials said the county could not offer the amount of money needed to undertake the renovations at Oakwood Park under that grant as a matter of policy. By transferring ownership of the land, the county would then fund the renovations through the open space fund.

"Details still need to be worked out, but the big picture is, New Providence has the land, the trust fund has the money," said Freeholder Deborah Scanlon at the meeting.

On Monday, New Providence Mayor John Thoms said he hopes to have the final contract negotiated with the county in a week. After the agreement is reached, the county must pass a resolution accepting the plans. The borough will also need to introduce and vote on an ordinance allowing the borough to sell the property to the county.

Residents will have another opportunity to discuss the borough's proposal at an open forum dedicated to Oakwood Park at 7:30 p.m. Thursday in New Providence's council chambers.