



STAYING INFORMED: Alton Parks and Rec Department doing same work with half the budget

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ALTON - With the Alton mayoral election only days away, it is becoming more and more important for Altonians to stay informed. Because of this, Riverbender.com is spotlighting certain issues broached by the four mayoral candidates and exploring what is right, what is wrong and what can be done to improve them.

Alton Parks and Recreation Director Michael Haynes, who was appointed by current Alton Mayor Brant Walker when he was elected in 2013, said he was happy to see the city, community and corporations come together during the course of the last few years to help improve Alton's parks. Haynes said his department was currently working at half the staffing and budget it had a decade ago to improve the same amount of parks.

"I came into the situation of a diminishing payroll," he said. "I've been looking at some numbers. Our budget and staff has pretty much been cut in half over the last 10 years. It's been a tough go for Alton, which is why we have to get creative when coming up with more resources. It's not like we have less parks here over time. We have the same amount, and they all need maintenance."

Haynes said his first goal upon taking his position was working with the current budget and allocating resources appropriately across the city. He said Alton's parks department was forced to look for more ways to generate revenue, saying "no one will do it for you."

Some of his first initiatives included increasing programs and exposure of the parks. Haynes said his department created more events and expanded existing programs in order to drive more people into parks - especially Gordon Moore. He said such events also increased city revenue, as visitors to athletic events would utilize the city's hotels and restaurants.

"We brought more athletic events and resources to Gordon Moore first," Haynes said. "That's where people pay to go. We focus on a quality product, which helps us survive. We have more tournaments there and new programs are growing. That is how I approached the job over the last few years."



As much as half of \$140,000 in this year's park grants went to Gordon Moore Park, Haynes said.

"We do split that between all the parks, but at least half of it goes to Gordon Moore, because of the need and its size," he said. "A lot goes into helping maintain the park for

infrastructure and improving fields as well as road work. The park hasn't seen much restoration. We've mostly just been maintaining the facilities we were blessed with when we received them in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Over time, facilities break down and fields get reworked."

In an interview with Alton Public Works Director Bob Barnhart, he said the city was working to regrade and re-turf Soccer Field Five this season and would do so for fields three and four by the end of autumn. He also said the city was able to replace some of the aging sprinkler heads through an anonymous donation from a private individual who was providing both materials and labor.

Barnhart also said demolition of an old concession stand and construction of a new one would occur within the next two months. Both Haynes and Barnhart were also excited about breaking ground on an inclusive playground at Gordon Moore Park in the coming weeks.

"An inclusive playground contains elements in it children of all abilities can use," Haynes said. "It's a rare thing, but I feel like with the size of our town and area in general, to not have one is bad for the kids in the area. We have a lot of children and 10 percent have a disability, and they have to travel 30-40 miles to have a play experience with other children like that. I really put an emphasis on that, and it's gotten a lot of support."



Recently, Gordon Moore has received several donations from the community, from private individuals, groups and corporations. Haynes said the park received funding from two \$125,000 grants; one from Phillips 66 and another from the Illinois Park and Recreation Department.

What about the other parks?

Alton has many more parks than Gordon Moore, of course, and Haynes said his department has worked to improve them as well. He said Gordon Moore, Rock Springs and Riverfront parks are the largest attractions to the area, but said his department has not neglected inner city parks such as Killion Park at Salu, which has received a new pavilion and playground equipment, as well as new paving on the basketball courts. He said similar work was done at Olin and Hellrung parks as well.

That money was done through park grants from Madison County, which Haynes said are earmarked for park improvements in municipalities through the county. He said he once had access to hundreds of thousands of dollars in state grants. Those went extinct during the current budget tug-of-war occurring at the state level. He said he was able to use the last of the money from those grants to help improve the scenic Riverview Park.

"Riverview has gotten some much-needed work," he said. "We improved the overlook and handicapped accessibility as well as the bathrooms and gazebos. People host a lot of weddings there."

Ameren Illinois also donated \$17,000 to help improve that park's electrical systems, which allowed for the gazebo improvements to be done by the city in a timely fashion. Haynes said donations such as those, as well as community volunteerism have helped his department do as much as it could do more than a decade ago, even with half the budget.

"Since I've been here, I feel like as time goes on, a lot of folks have seen the need," he said. "We can't take care of everything on our own. We need the help of corporations and neighborhood groups."

Such neighborhood groups have helped maintain Riverview Park as well as Haskell, Rock Springs and the recovery of North Side Park, which was initiated by Drew and Hope Mader, who also founded and continue to organize Rock the Hops.

Rock Springs Park has been another large project Haynes said his department has overseen. He said the park's fountain, as well as every other fountain across the city, is in working order.

"For the first time since anyone can remember, all the fountains across the city are working," he said. "When I got here, there was an emphasis on it, because quality of life is a big thing for parks and recreation. We worked to improve landscaping around the fountains and repairing the water features, or they would otherwise be an eyesore. We allocated some of the money from grants to water features."

The City of Alton has also partnered with groups such as Rock Springs 2020, the Grandpa Gang and Alton Middle School to improve Rock Springs Park as well. Haynes said the park was underused and was falling into disrepair with lots of dead fallen trees and crumbling roads.

"Trees will die, fall over and cause problems with the road," he said. "When the big trees fall down, more sunlight gets to the ground and undergrowth develops. It's hard to maintain. We've really worked hard cleaning this place. We have a good partnership with Alton Middle School and Rock Spring 2020."

Those two groups worked to create an outdoor classroom on the east side of the park near a bioswale created by Lewis and Clark Community College's YouthBuild program and ecology students to naturally prevent erosion. Students from the middle school also worked to eradicate invasive undergrowth such as bush honeysuckle from the east side of the park.



Baseball is also a focus at Rock Springs, Haynes said. Because Gordon Moore Park had more demand than space for baseball games and practices, he said the city has worked to revamp the baseball diamond at Rock Springs, which he said has already been utilized for games and practices.

Additionally, visitors to Rock Springs Park have also been able to enjoy and utilize a walking path around the park through grant money. Haynes said that trail has worked to "provide a tremendous boost" and make the park more accessible and visible.

Finally, Haynes said he is partnering with the Grandpa Gang, who does the Christmas lights at Rock Springs, to build a new bathroom and storage facility at the park.

"It's exciting to have a bathroom open to the public at Rock Springs Park for the first time in years," he said.

Riverfront Park, which mayoral candidate Scott Dixon said should be Alton's "crown jewel" is maintained by the parks and recreation department, but Haynes said the department has no control over the amphitheater, which is managed by the Alton Amphitheater Commission.



While they do not have control over the booking or sponsorship of the amphitheater, Haynes said the department does work to keep the property maintained and recently invested in storage for tables and chairs for events, so the city does not have to pay the expenses of rental fees each time such items are needed.

When asked if he could see Riverfront Park one day hosting an ice-skating rink - as proposed by Alton mayoral candidate Dan Rauschkolb - Haynes said he thought the idea would be "pretty cool," but was concerned about how it would be funded and maintained.

"I would love to see it," he said. "I don't know where we could put it. We couldn't put it behind the amphitheater and move the fountains. There are too many moving parts.

Also, we couldn't use money from the budget to do it. If the revenue could be found to build and maintain it, I think it would be a great idea to have one out here."