

# Rally for the rims: People bring different perspectives to James Killion Park

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**ALTON** - On Monday morning, the City of Alton made a controversial decision to remove the rims of the basketball court at James H. Killion Park at Salu due to what was described as "excessive littering."

While the decision angered some people, in a poll on Riverbender.com in which more than 1,700 people answered, a 60 percent majority agreed with the city's decision to remove the rims due to the trash issue. The vocal minority, however, has been expressing concerns about what many view as a "heavy-handed" measure from the city. Among the loudest voices against the decision are people who use the park every week.

A group of such people gathered at the park Tuesday night as part of a rally for the kids who play at the park. The rally was organically organized through the efforts of several groups and organizations including a hip-hop radio show called the Message on 89.9 WLCA FM and a political organization called Confluence Progressives.

Around two dozen people of diverse backgrounds and demographics assembled at the basketball court between 5-6:30 p.m. Tuesday to meet, show support for the people who use the courts (especially area children) and discuss solutions to the trash problem. Several people were strolling the park with plastic bags, picking up trash before the rally even began.



Altonian Sergio Miller was picking up trash alongside his young daughter. Miller said he lives closer to Downtown Alton, but said he grew up playing basketball in the park.

"This is our park, and we love it," Miller said. "When trash gets in the area, we do our best to keep it clean. This is our park, and we do what we can to maintain it. It keeps a lot of people out of trouble."

Miller said he, and many other residents, were thankful when the City of Alton recently redid the basketball courts. He said the courts before the restoration were uneven and caused several hazards. He added he did not understand why the city would take away the rims after going through the trouble of restoring the courts.

Other work was being done in the park as well. The old sidewalks were being removed Tuesday, in order for new sidewalks to be put in their place.

Alton Mayor Brant Walker's Chief of Staff Kimberly Clark said the amount of trash in the park caused the Alton Parks and Recreation Department to spend two hours cleaning litter before each mowing session. It was that excessive time spent, which caused the rims to be removed. She said Alton only has five parks employees to manage 17 parks.

Miller said he has never seen the park in such a state it would take someone two hours to clean the litter. He said no one from the city or the police department has warned him or any other park goers about the litter previous to removing the rims.

Rally-goer Robyn Omera and her wife Lynne Burnett said they went to the park Tuesday evening in support of the children who play there. Omera said she believed the city's actions were racially-motivated.





"I feel very strongly this is an outrageous racist move," she said. "This is a black community, and black communities are treated differently. The majority of the time, this park is very well kept up. It's used for lots of picnics and celebrations. People use this park everyday, and now they remove the rims? What kind of solution is that?"

Abe Lee Barham, who worked diligently to have the park named for Alton civil rights activist James H. Killion, strongly disagrees with the assessment the city's decision had anything to do with race. While he strongly opposed the city's decision to remove the rims, he also acknowledged the issue of litter in the park.

"I don't agree with the mayor's heavy-handed approach," he said. "But kids and parents need to take ownership of this park. There are a lot of fair-weather activists out here picking up trash in front of the news cameras, but where are they every day? I worked hard to get this park renamed for Mr. Killion, and I want it to be the pride of the city. We need accountability. We need solutions. This is not a black and white issue. This affects everyone in the city. It's not the first time this park has been filthy, but when you punish us, you punish yourself."

Barham said viewing this issue as race-based will cause even more division in Alton. He said Alton is too small of a city for such division, and already has enough without this issue adding to it.



Richard L. Holman Sr., 68, said he is a property owner in the area who comes to both James H. Killion Park at Salu and Hellrung Park to pick up litter for the kids to feel safe playing. He, like Barham, believes the city's tactics were heavy-handed.

"It's deplorable to think this park is the eyesore of the city," he said. "Why weren't we notified before they took the rims down? Why do they want us to police it when people are supposed to be doing that for the city? It's up to each individual group to clean up after themselves. I do see trash here a lot, but I am not sure why they would deprive everyone for a few."

Precinct Committeemen Vice President Steven Kimbrough said, as an elected official himself, he could not understand why the mayor would make such a decision.



"As an elected official, I believe in doing the right thing," he said. "This is not doing the right thing. This has never happened before, not under any other mayor. To me, I think he should have warned people before doing something like this."

Nathan Keener of Confluence Progressives, a progressive political organization, also brought a sign to the park Tuesday in support of the children who utilize the court.

"There is a much better way to solve a city-wide problem than this," he said. "Litter is not a good look for the city, but we have groups addressing the situation. The litter cleanup groups and the community policing commission, aren't those people in a better place to solve this situation? They probably could have helped a lot more than tearing down the hoops."



Barham also expressed concern for the heavy equipment in the park for the sidewalk reconstruction. He said as many as 700 kids will be in the park this Saturday morning for the Back to School Stay in School event, during which children are able to collect free school supplies through the Alton Branch of the NAACP.

"I don't understand why they're worried about litter when they have heavy equipment out there, which the children can get hurt on," he said. "We're going to have 600-700 kids out here this Saturday, and all that equipment and work looks pretty hazardous."

A representative from the City of Alton said no plans for restoring the hoops have been announced at this time.