

SOUTH BEND BOARD OF PARK COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR MEETING
March 16, 2026

The Board of Park Commissioners of the City of South Bend, Indiana met on Monday March 16, 2026, at Howard Park Ribbon Town Room, 219 S. Saint Louis Blvd, and virtually on Microsoft Teams for its regular meeting. Notice of the date, time and place of the meeting were duly given as required by law. The public was provided with a link to join the virtual meeting.

Park Board members present were as follows:

Mr. Mark Neal, President
Mr. Sam Centellas

VPA staff members present: Jordan Gathers, Executive Director; Anastasia Smith-Davis, Executive Assistant; Dezha Moore, Chief of Venues and Promotion; Erin Thornton, Chief Experience Officer; John Martinez, Chief of Park Operations; Macey Hanna, Director of Recreation; Cody Risedorph, Director of Golf Operations; Demetrius Kennedy, Volunteer Coordinator; Olivia Sanchez, Special Events Manager; Garry Harrington, Rum Village Manager; Kelli Notteboom, Aquatics Manager; Evelyn Mitchell, Custodial Superintendent III; and Patrick Sherman, Director of Project Management.

Other city representatives present: Jenna Throw, Assistant City Attorney; Sheila Niezgodski, 6th district Councilwoman.

I. Call to Order

President, Mark Neal called the meeting to order at 5:04 pm.

President, Mark Neal notes quorum of two Commissioners and confirmed the third is out for bereavement and will not be joining.

II. Minutes of the Regular Board Meeting held on February 16, 2026, meeting.

Motion to approve the meeting minutes of February 16, 2026, by Sam Centellas, supported by Mark Neal, motion carried. Roll call vote 2-0.

III. Consent Agenda

Motion to amend the agenda to move agenda item number 5, Report by Organization up one spot and approve the consent agenda items as presented, by Sam Centellas, supported by Mark Neal, motion carried. Roll call vote 2-0.

Mark Neal confirms the Commissioners approved of the first and second action items, numbers two and three on the agenda. The next item listed on the agenda has been switched from Interviews of Interested Residents to Report by Organization. Presentations from the YMCA and Ecological Advocacy Committee are to follow.

IV. Report by Organization

1. YMCA

Mark Weber of the YMCA begins his presentation by thanking Executive Director Jordan Gathers and the Park Board Commissioners for the ongoing partnership for the last six years.

Mark introduces himself as the CEO of YMCA and introduces Denise Peters, the COO of the YMCA. He continues to provide background on the organization. Over the past several years, the organization has merged Saint Joe Niles and the South Bend YMCA into one regional presence. Consolidating their back-office functions to achieve economies of scale and enable greater community investment. Since partnering with the City of South Bend and the O'Brien Center, the membership of the YMCA saw significant increases. Membership grew from under 1,000 to over 3,300 and the downtown facility now serves 3,700 members, totaling 7,000 individuals impacted by YMCA programming.

YMCA's combined facilities operate with approximately \$4 million in expenses, set aside for depreciation and provided over \$1 million in scholarships in the past year, supported by community donations.

The YMCA offers diverse programming for all ages, with a focus on healthy living for seniors, daycare, preschool, and out-of-school programs, and has invested over \$200,000 in equipment upgrades at the O'Brien Center. The YMCA collaborates with the South Bend Police Department to combat infant and youth water deaths by partnering with the Tales program. This program provides water safety training, utilizing local school pools like Washington, Riley, and Adams High school, reaching over 400 children last summer.

Due to the increased need of affordable, quality childcare, the YMCA in collaboration with city officials are preparing to open a daycare center for up to 90 children in the downtown facility.

Mark Weber ended his presentation with sharing the life and legacy of Barbara Emmons. Barbara grew up attending camp Eberheart then transitioned to being a camp counselor, which led her to become a teacher and youth advocate. A bequest from Barbara Emmons now funds camp scholarships for up to 42 children annually, with efforts to identify and connect low-income families to these opportunities. Both Mark and Denise shared stories of Barbara's kindness and impact on youth.

President, Mark Neal thanks Mark Weber, Denise Peter, and the YMCA for their partnership and welcomes the next organization, the Ecological Advocacy Committee to speak.

2. Ecological Advocacy Committee (EAC)

The newly appointed chair of the Ecological Advocacy Committee, Clay Kusbach of 27433 Inwood Rd in North Liberty addresses the board. Clay shares his professional ecological background sharing he is a certified ecological restoration practitioner, among others. He is a native to the South Bend area as his family-owned Howard Park Hardware.

On February 23, 2026, the Ecological Advocacy Committee voted to authorize Clay to address the board regarding the Rum Village Master Plan. Clay begins speaking on the proposed green Mountain Bike Trail, which is planned to occupy a sensitive champion trees and critical habitat previously identified. The early conceptual plans of the trail conflict with the guiding principles and practices outlined in the VPA 2021 Natural Resource Management Plan. Rum Village Forest is uniquely diverse in its native flora and fauna. Local bird alliance groups have previously documented dozens of bird species, including several rare species and varieties.

Clay concluded his presentation by stating there are numerous community members and activist groups expressing their concerns about lasting ecological harm; and the EAC has voted to oppose the current trail

design and called for engagement with ecological experts and community partners to develop alternative improvement plans.

President Mark Neal thanks Clay and the EAC for their thoughts and shares, Executive Director, Jordan Gathers will have an address at the end of the meeting.

Transitioning, Mark Neal introduces the new segment, interviewing of interested residents. During this time, he informs the room, speakers are allowed to have three minutes to talk. He recognizes Councilwoman Sheila Niezgodski of the 6th district, and thanks her for joining.

V. Interviewing of Interested Residents

Deb Marr of 901 Eastwood Side St., wanted to share her input on the Rum Village Master Plan. Deb shared her appreciation for the focus on the increased access efforts, ADA accessibility, updating the playground with more natural materials, and making the roads safer for pedestrians. Deb continued by sharing her concerns that doubling the number of trails would harm the high-quality forest ecosystem, compact soil, fragment understory vegetation, and negatively impact rare plant species and wildlife. Deb urged the board to consider alternative solutions for the mountain bike trail.

Jennifer Betts of 730 Cottage Road, Avenue, chair of the South Bend Bird Alliance. On behalf of the SB Bird Alliance, Jennifer requests more time for input from ecological advocacy groups like Wild Ones, EAC and other local conservation organizations before the plan is finalized, mentioning a need for robust discussion and inclusion of conservation perspectives. She shared there are a lot fears within the ecological community.

Bruce Cates of 251 North Crescent Avenue highlighted the problematic use of the term ‘zones of interest’ in the display images during the January 29th community engagement meeting. Bruce noted the historical association with Auschwitz and recommended the terminology be changed to avoid negative connotations and ensure inclusivity.

Multiple additional residents, ecological advocates, and organizational representatives voice strong opposition to the proposed mountain bike trail in Rum Village, citing ecological health, process concerns, and urgent need to protect park’s growth of the forest and native plantings.

VI. Use of Parks- New Events

1. 574 Peace Walk

Demetrius Kennedy, Volunteer Coordinator, presented the 574 Peace Walk event application. This event is organized by Mentoring Moments and will feature a table layout, food trucks, and positive outreach activities; all application requirements were met.

Motion to approve the Use of Parks New Events, by Sam Centellas, supported by Mark Neal, motion carried. Roll call vote 2-0.

VII. New Business

1. Kennedy Park: Honeywell Monitoring Wells Install Request- John Martinez

Chief of Park Operations, John Martinez presents on the proposed installation of two additional Honeywell monitoring wells at Kennedy Park, approval pending finalization of legal agreement and coordination with ongoing park improvements. The proposed wells D13 and S29 are discussed in relation to existing and planned park features, with adjustments to be made to avoid conflicts with a new walking path. The wells are part of ongoing Honeywell environment monitoring since the 20210s.

Motion to approve the installation of wells contingent on completion of formal agreement between the city and contractor, by Sam Centellas, supported by Mark Neal, motion carried. Roll call vote 2-0.

2. Resolution No. 2026-002

Joseph Molnar from the Department of Community Investment presents on the former Drewery Brewery site. This site was acquired by the city in 2022 after years of neglect and improper demolition, underwent EPA-led cleanup removing over 14,000 tons of contaminated debris, with additional city and state-funded remediation phases ongoing.

Phase three cleanup, including removal of remaining foundations and final environmental remediation, is scheduled for 2026, with the adjacent Portage Elwood Shopping Center also slated for demolition and redevelopment. Although an EPA grant application was unsuccessful, the city secured \$3.5 million in READI Blight Removal funds and \$2.6 million from the state, supporting plans for new housing, commercial spaces, and expanded parkland in line with the Near Northwest Neighborhood Plan.

Future planning will involve public input and coordination with nearby neighborhoods, with the final subdivision and land transfer requiring further board approval.

Motion to approve Resolution No. 2026-002, by Sam Centellas, supported by Mark Neal, motion carried. Roll call vote 2-0.

3. AEP Easement- Jenna Throw

Jenna Throw, City attorney, presents the easement which allows AEP to install necessary cables for the zoon's expansion, with the board confirming coordination with zoo staff and understanding of future development constraints.

Motion to approve AEP Easement, by Sam Centellas, supported by Mark Neal, motion carried. Roll call vote 2-0.

4. VPA Capital Project Presentation- Patrick Sherman

Patrick Sherman provides a comprehensive update on Venues, Parks, and Arts (VPA) capital projects, including completed, ongoing, and upcoming projects, funding sources, MWBE participation, and highlights of major park improvements.

VPA manages a large portfolio within Public Works, with over \$300 million in citywide capital projects since 2017, funded by a mix of bonds, grants, and city resources. Major projects completed in 2025 include the MLK Dream Center, Walker Field Connectivity, with ongoing work at Leeper Park tennis courts, O'Brien Park, South Park Riverwalk, and Kennedy Park.

Projects scheduled for completion in 2026 and beyond include the Raclin Murphy Encore Center, Main Street housing and parking garage, Potawatomi Park phase two, Coal Line Trail extension, and potential improvements at Howard Park and Rum Village. VPA projects have met or exceeded MWBE goals, with significant participation in the MLK Dream Center project, and continue to focus on inclusive contracting and community benefit.

VIII. Report by Chief of Venues and Promotion Dezha Moore

Mark Neal notes that the Chief of Venues and Promotion was unable to present their report due to illness and will be rescheduled for the next meeting.

IX. Business by Chief Executive Director Jordan Gathers

Jordan expresses gratitude to the leadership of Mayor Mueller, the Common Council, Park Board Commissioners, and VPA teams for their support and briefly highlights their growth and success in programs and events. He continued to give the following updates:

- Highlighting the success of the Saint Patrick's Day parade and the reopening of Seitz Park for live music.
- Shares excitement for the upcoming season at Potawatomi Zoo and the Zoo Luminare series.
- The department is overseeing \$75 million in projects to be completed this year, including improvements at Leeper Tennis, Byers Softball, Splash pads and playgrounds, with a goal to reach \$100 million in the coming year.
- Jordan reiterated the city's commitment to ecological restoration and native plantings in Rum Village. Clarifying that the Master plan remains conceptual, and assured continued community engagement and protection of the park's natural character.
- The department reported over 75,000 attendees at free events, 300,000 guests at the Morris Performing Arts Center, 14,000 softball participants, 1,000 youth campers, 80,000 golf rounds played, and nearly 20,000 volunteers hours contributed.
- Lastly, Jordan invited the board and public to attend Mayor Mueller's State of the City address, where further updates on park investments and city progress will be shared.

This concluded the updates by Executive Director, Jordan Gathers.

XI. Adjournment

The next scheduled meeting will be held Monday, April 20, at 5:00 p.m. at Howard Park Event Center.

Respectfully Submitted,
Anastasia Smith-Davis