

SOUTH BEND BOARD OF PARK COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR MEETING
July 20, 2026

The Board of Park Commissioners of the City of South Bend, Indiana met on Monday July, 20 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
Ms. Consuella Hopkins, Vice President
Ms. Jennifer Perri
Mr. Sam Centellas

VPA staff members present: Erin Thornton, Executive Director; Anastasia Smith-Davis, Executive Assistant; Dezha Moore, Chief of Venues and Promotion; Amy Roush, Director of Experience and Events; Macey Hanna, Director of Recreation (virtual); Cynthia Taylor, Director of Community Programming (virtual); Olivia Sanchez, Special Events Manager; Kelli Notteboom, Aquatics Manager; and Mercedes Aguirre, Project Manager.

Other city representatives present: Michael Schmidt, Assistant City Attorney; Opheila Gooden-Rogers, 2nd District Councilwoman; Sharon McBride, 3rd District Councilwoman; and Dr. Heidi Beidinger, 4th District Councilwoman.

I. Call to Order

President, Mark Neal called the meeting to order at 5:01 pm.

President, Mark Neal called the regular scheduled meeting to order and welcomed the newly appointed Commissioner, Jennifer Perri to the Park Board.

II. Minutes of the Regular Board Meeting held on June 15, 2026, meeting.

Assistant Attorney, Michael, notified the board that only the Commissioners who attend the June meeting can make and approval the motion for the minutes.

Motion to approve the meeting minutes of June 15 2026, by Sam Centellas, supported by Mark Neal, motion carried. Roll call vote 2-0.

III. Consent Agenda

President, Mark Neal asked the board if there were any questions concerning the Consent Agenda before the motion. No questions were asked.

Motion to approve the consent agenda as presented, by Sam Centellas, supported by Consuella Hopkins, motion carried. Roll call vote 4-0.

IV. Interviewing of Interested Residents

Mark Neals informed the audience this portion of the meeting is for residents to discuss matters not addressed on the agenda.

Steve Sass of 27910 US Highway 20 of New Carlisle spoke briefly about his time presenting in March of 2026. He noticed a portion of the March Park Board minutes being identical to the minutes from the February 16th meeting minutes. Steve went on to say numerous community members, names some individually, stating they voiced their concern and their statements were not correctly accounted for in the minute's documentation. He asked the Commissioners to consider going back to revise the minutes and add the comments of those who took their time to attend the March meeting.

He continued by making comments on the Rum Village Masterplan. Observing the mountain bike trail is off the table but was surprised to see a tree canopy walk instead. From his experience with studying bird activity in Rum Village, he confessed the last canopy walk negatively impacted the bird nesting population, he shared his shock that the combined ecological groups missed this. He asked the city to move forward with any Masterplan to give serious consideration to the plans and how they may effect natural resources.

The last topic Steve touched on was the Midwest Continental Divide Trail Plan, commenting on the amount of money spent so far by the city of South Bend and how there needs to be more transparency on if this involves the Elbel Golf Course or just Mud Lake.

A comment was made by Assistant Attorney Michael Schmidt that the city would review February and March 2026 minutes. In the case that error is found, an amended version will be presented at the August meeting for the Commissioners to review and approve. He asked the board clerk, Anastasia Smith-Davis to investigate the matter.

Derek Deeter of 1740 Portage Avenue asked the board if there were aware of the copy of what he called the "genesis" to the Continental Divide Trail Plan, the "Ecotourism Planning for the Western Rescue of South Bend Conceptual Design for the Indiana Continental Trail".

The board was unaware of the book.

Mr. Deeter continued to give background on the financial investments made with taxpayer dollars and COSB funds and questioned if the mayor, who is on the printed materials as a contributor, came to the parks department to discuss.

President, Mark Neal confirmed the board was never got a formal presentation on it.

Continuing, Mr. Deeter complained about the lack of citizen input and asked the board to have a discussion with the administration about this document and project.

Michael Schmidt asked Derek to allow the clerk, Anastasia, to record the title of the book for our record.

Micael follow up with an update from the AEP Easements. Informing the board the process is ongoing and that the city is actively in negotiations with AEP regarding the easements at Keller and Hickory, noting the board authorized Mark Neal to sign documents once finalized and expressed optimism about reaching a fair compromise.

V. Outstanding Partner of the Month

1. South Bend Police Department

Amy Roush, Director of Experience and Events, shared the parks department felt it important to highlight the South Bend Police Department as the outstanding partner of the month. Noting how they have been a positive presence and encouragement to VPA providing exemplary events, programs, and spaces not only for this year but all the time. She invited the present Officers to make a statement before the board.

Sergeant Jarvis shared heartfelt appreciation to the parks department as they work in partnership to provide the community with safe and engaging experiences. Jarvis spoke on dual partnership more, diving into some of the core police free events like the annual Schools Out and Back to School cookouts where VPA is a great help.

Mark Neal thanks the Common Council members who joined the meeting, Ophelia Gooden-Rogers, Heidi Beidinger, and Sharon McBride.

VI. Use of Parks- New Events

1. Frank Willis Birthday Party
2. North Shore Triangle Summer Concert
3. Taylor/ McGrew Family & Friends Picnic
4. Heffin Wedding

Amy Roush of 301 S Saint Blvd, presented the New Events segment. She detailed 3 of the 4 new events are new, while one, the North Shore Triangle Summer Concert is a returning event. She followed up with a quick snapshot of each event, giving a rough estimate of guest count as well as confirming all renters have the necessary paperwork and insurance.

Motion to approve the Use of Parks New Events, by Sam Centellas, supported by Consuella Hopkins, motion carried. Roll call vote 4-0.

Mark Neal commented on the number of events the board approved each year, estimating around 75 events. Amy corrected Mark and said it is more around 400 events per year.

VII. Business by Chief Executive Director Erin Thornton

Erin shared the following updates:

- 2026 Kids Triathlon- 140 youth participants, event postponed to Sunday due to poor air quality
- READI 1.0 – closed out the grant award process earlier in the week
- Summer Camp- 235 youth campers across VPA camp sites, MLK, Charles Black, and Pinhook
- Summer Concert Series- 2,300 attendees across the 3 locations for concert series
- 4th of July Celebration- Over 10k joined in the festivities and drone show at Howard Park
- Flag Football- After much interest from our online community, a new program, flag football league was born
- Adult Recess- July 24th at Charles Black Center
- Annual Ray Comer Pickleball Social
- 2027 Budget underway
- Men's Major National Tournament at Byers
- Mural Mania- begins July 29th with expanding locations
- Kennedy Aquatic Center- construction team was able to save more trees than expected
- Rum Village- received bids for Walker field
- Seitz- phase construction continuing, park remains open through construction, estimated finish May/June 2027
- O'Brien- playground and splashpad improvements underway
- MLK- solar panels installed

Vice President, Consuella Hopkins informs Erin the board has not had a chance to review the Kennedy Park Plans and asked how parking worked while Seitz bridgeway is under construction.

Amy Roush answered the question about Seitz. She said pedestrians have always been welcome to park on the West side of Niles Ave and how there has been additional signage added to the area to also direct crowds to the park.

Erin Thornton also confirmed the Kennedy Park plans would be shared with the board.

This concluded the updates by Executive Director, Erin Thornton.

XI. Adjournment

The next scheduled meeting will be held Monday, August 17, at 5:00 p.m. at Howard Park Event Center.

Respectfully Submitted,
Anastasia Smith-Davis