

SOUTH BEND BOARD OF PARK COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR MEETING
May 18, 2026

The Board of Park Commissioners of the City of South Bend, Indiana met on Monday May 18, 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: Allie Dolz-Lane, Interim Executive Director; Anastasia Smith-Davis, Executive Assistant; Erin Thornton, Chief Experience Officer; Dezha Moore, Chief of Venues and Promotion; Chief of Park Operations, John Martinez; Amy Roush, Director of Experiences and Events; Macey Hanna, Director of Recreation; Director of Community Programming, Cynthia Taylor; Olivia Sanchez, Marketing Manager; Mercedes Aguirre, Project Manager; Special Events Manager, Clinton Chamberlin; Administrative Assistant, Nayza Macedo; Program Coordinator, Abigail Ortiz-Edwards; Youth Employment Manager, Shakir Carr; and Evelyn Mitchell, Superintendent III.

Other city representatives present: Michael Schmidt, Assistant City Attorney; and Ophelia Gooden-Rodgers, 2nd District Councilwoman.

I. Call to Order

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

President Mark Neal recognizes the quorum with the two Commissioner's onsite for the meeting.

II. Minutes of the Regular Board Meeting held on April 20, 2026, meeting.

Motion to approve the meeting minute of April 20, 2026, by Sam Centellas, supported by Mark Neal, motion carried. Roll call vote 2-0.

III. Consent Agenda

Motion to approve the consent agenda of May 18, 2026, by Sam Centellas, supported by Mark Neal, motion carried. Roll call vote 2-0.

IV. Interviewing of Interested Residents

Sue Kesim proposed installing letters, number, shape, and color boards in every park equipped with QR codes for pre-k sign ups to address the local literacy crisis and provide educational opportunities for children and parents during park visits. Sue noted that summer would be an ideal time for implementation and mentioned having contracted other organizations about the idea. Sue also suggested converting some of the 7,000 vacant and land-banked properties in South Bend into areas with native wildflowers and plants, managed by private organizations or university sustainability programs, to reduce mowing needs and promote ecological and educational benefits. She continued to recommend a new city requirement should be put in place for all who are seeking arborists licenses to take a three-hour training potentially involved with Purdue Extension and Wild Ones to improve professional standards and promote native plantings, possibly requiring an ordinance change.

John Hamilton of 913 W Colfax advocated for the identification and preservation of natural areas within city parks, suggesting collaboration with local university biology departments and emphasizing the importance of maintaining biodiversity for long term community well-being.

Mark Settnem raised concerns about the potential noise issues and environmental impacts of the proposed Howard Park Bandshell, as well as the city's track record with outdoor pools, recommending consultation with local country clubs for pool maintenance expertise.

Hodge Patel expressed support for continued investment in parks, noting the positive community impact and sharing personal experiences with park events and the parks department's responsiveness during a trip at the East Race Waterway.

V. Outstanding Partner of the Month- Martin's Supermarket Erskine Plaza

Director of Experience and Events, Amy Roush acknowledged Martin's Supermarket of Erskine Plaza for their longstanding partnership, including support for the Kids Triathlon, Winter Open at Howard Park, and providing snacks for National Kids to Park Day, maintaining their commitment even after corporate changes.

Martin's representatives could not attend the meeting.

VI. Use of Parks- New Events

Amy Roush continued with outlining the five new events like the Veteran Affairs Mobile Unit, Eastside Reunion, Plein Air Paint Out, Fun and Finance Festival with the latter organized by a local financial institution to raised awareness.

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

VII. Report by Organization First Tee

Jenny Zimmerman of First Tee reported on the steady growth of programming. Showing a growth chart of in life skill classes, high retention rates, and increased participation in the PGA Junior League and Girls gold, with significant numbers of youth involved in competitors and after-school programs. The program received the PGA Game Changer Award for the fourth consecutive year, introduced the Flo Trager Love of the Game Award, and celebrated individual achievements such as Levi Gustin's recognition and Selah Unwin's collegiate golf success. New partnerships were established with organizations like YMCA and the Robinson Community Learning Center, and the program secured a three-year PGA grant to provide free PGA Junior League participation for 32 Title I school students.

The board discussed ongoing challenges in providing transportation for local youth to participate in First Tee activities, with efforts including grant writing, bus rentals, and coordination with schools and families to address barriers.

Jenny continued with upcoming initiatives include the School Skills Challenge, national leadership opportunities for participants, collaboration with the South Bend Police Athletic League, and continued fundraising and outreach to expand program access.

VIII. Report by Director of Community Programming Cynthia Taylor

Cynthia Taylor and the community programming team presented highlights from the first quarter and outlined strategic plans for summer, including youth employment, mental health partnerships, mobile recreation, and the launch of the Summer Fun Backstage Pass. Cynthia recognized the Youth Employment Job Fair and placement . The department received 94 applications at the youth employment job fair, with six outside employers conducting on-site interviews; placements are being finalized for youth aged 15-18, with up to 26 hours of work per week and financial literacy sessions included. The mobile rec program and street outreach initiatives aim to bring activities directly to neighborhoods, including the Popsicle Splash Pad Tour, monthly presence at Linden Market, and engagement in ten parks across the city. Four mental health partners, including Ronald McDonald House, Juvenile Justice Center, Autism Lighthouse, and the Youth Service Bureau, are collaborating to provide support, programming, and staff training for children and families facing various challenges. The Summer Fun Backstage Pass, sponsored by WISSCO Irrigation, will provide 100-300 children with t-shirts, lanyards, and event cards to encourage participation in summer activities, with incentives for engagement and a focus on reducing screen time. Two summer camps will operate at Charles Black Center and Pinhook Park, with additional partnerships for programming and field trips involving Purdue Polytech, Chick-fil-A, St. Joe County Parks, Oaklawn Health, and the Indiana Youth Institute.

The board applauds Cynthia and her team for the outstanding community engagement and programming.

IX. Report by Interim Executive Director Allie Dolz-Lane

Allie Dolz-Lane, acting Interim Executive Director, provided updates on completed, ongoing, and planned capital projects, including playground installations, splash pads, renovations, and upcoming master plan presentations, with ribbon cuttings scheduled for several parks.

- Highlighting the department capital completions such as Raclin Murphy Encore Center
- Upcoming advancements include Sorin Park installation, Splash Pad and Playground at O'Brien Park, MLK Dream Center, Seitz Park Walkway, and East Race.
- Future projects include Howard Park Bandshell and Kennedy Park.

This concluded the updates by Interim Executive Director, Allie Dolz-Lane.

XI. Adjournment

The next scheduled meeting will be held Monday, June 15, 2026 at 5:00 p.m. at Howard Park Event Center.

Respectfully Submitted,
Anastasia Smith-Davis