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Changes for Both Darien Beaches Proposed by Consultants in Draft Parks Master Plan

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An amphitheater or an outdoor pool (or both) at Weed Beach, a fishing pier at Pear Tree Point Beach (either pointed south or west) and an expanded concession/comfort station there are among the ideas consultants have for improving the town's two public beaches.

The ideas came at a public hearing Wednesday by consultants working on a draft master parks plan for the Darien Parks and Recreation Commission. Not even the draft is finalized yet, but when the process is done, town officials hope to have guidelines for how to improve parks across Darien in years to come.

The consultants — Daniel Biggs, team leader for Weston & Sampson, and Art Thatcher, principal-in-charge for GreenPlay LLC — said they were looking for feedback from the public in this and an upcoming public hearing, and they could change the proposals based on that and on ideas from the commission.

- *Editor's note: This article summarizes part of the presentation (concentrating on only some of the many proposals) and some of the reactions to it at the public hearing. Other parts of the presentation, including suggestions for both town beaches and other parks, will be covered soon in a future article or articles.*

See also the first article in this series:

- [Town Pool, Walking Trails Among Consultants' Ideas in Draft Master Plan for Parks](#) (Friday, Sept. 22)

How Important Beaches Are to Darienites

In Thatcher's part of the presentation, he described surveys in which some members of the public were selected to give their priorities and ideas for parks and recreation in town, and others volunteered their feedback through an online survey.

Both groups showed that beaches are a high priority for town residents overall, and improvements to them are also a high priority:

About the Descriptions of the Proposals

These are accounts, only slightly summarized and often in quotes, about what Biggs said during the presentation, which gave broad overview descriptions about each park and was sketchy about almost all details.

Some of the descriptions of the options offered were brief, particularly for Concept B (sometimes referred to as "Option B") for Pear Tree Point Beach. For the amphitheater at Weed Beach, for example, nothing was said to describe it or what it would be used for.

The maps (which are sometimes difficult to read) often have information not in the PowerPoint-like lists provided with them and both sometimes have information in statements by Biggs given in the presentation, and in some cases, Biggs provided more information in his talk than were on the slides presented at the meeting.

Anyone with more questions about the consultants' proposals is encouraged to bring them up at a public hearing scheduled in Town Hall Auditorium on Oct. 4. Questions and comments can also be emailed to Parks & Rec officials (email addresses are at the bottom of this article).

Weed Beach

Concept A

"This includes adding additional parking and an outdoor pool area," Biggs said of Concept A (or "Option A").

The consultants also propose "enhancing the existing pathway network that loops around the park area [...] adding a fit trail within the Short Lane parcel," and adding two more paddle courts next to the existing ones.

Also in the proposal: "additional shade structures." What these might consist of or look like was not explained in the presentation, although they were suggested for many parks in town.

Concept B

Another 36 parking spaces would be added to the parking lot, and instead of a swimming pool and, for younger children, a splash pad, only the splash pad would be built.

More landscaped areas are proposed in this option, with shade structures and vegetation.

An amphitheater would be constructed off of the beach area, and (as in Concept A) a pathway network looping around the park. "The pathway would include boardwalks or bridges as necessary," Biggs said.

This concept includes "restriping one of the tennis courts for pickleball," he said. "We've had an interest in having one of the courts converted, for very low cost," Biggs said.

Public Comment About Weed Beach

Darien Junior Sailing Team

A few speakers at the public hearing said they want the master plan to strongly support the [Darien Junior Sailing Team](#). The presentation about Weed Beach (in both concepts presented) mentions "new small boat storage and soft launch."

John Whipple of Hanson Road told the commission that the team currently operates "out of a semi parking space with a temporary tent."

The sailing team is the only in-Darien option for people who want their kids to learn to sail but who don't belong to a yacht club or country club in town. The organization "is a nonprofit not even associated with the town or paid for by the town — just purely a volunteer and member-supported organization," Whipple said.

He put up the tent himself in 10 hours, he said. "Having a space for this program is actually critical, and it's, I think, fairly inexpensive."

It would be even better to have a permanent structure for the program at the beach, or "even just a level space with just a lean-to, a shady space anyone could use."

Sophie Cirillo, president of Friends of Woodland Park, spoke mostly about that park, but she added that her son worked in the sailing program.

"They did a wonderful job this summer," she said. "It's just a great program for sailing in this town. They compete with all the [...] yacht clubs [in] regattas. [...]"

"I hope that maybe you might consider a boat house or something of the sort, so that it [the program] still exists, somehow. [...]"

Sarah Mirsky of Holmes Avenue said her son was in the "fantastic" sailing program for three years and pointed out that the organization conducts fundraisers to buy the boats itself and stores them.

"I see [in the presentation] there's a mention of it, but not really [for] a storage facility. It's hard for the program to attract good talent" if town officials don't give it recognition as a resource for town residents at Weed Beach, she said.

"When I came to town, when I had no children, I heard about this esteemed program," she said. "It's harder and harder to maintain it because it doesn't seem to have the full support of the town. I think it probably does have support — it just needs to be remembered."

Pickleball and Tennis

Sean Shay of Leroy Avenue told the Parks and Recreation Commission that he's advocated increasing the number of [pickleball](#) courts in town for some time and noticed that one was proposed for Weed Beach Park.

He was pleased to get one at Cherry Lawn Park, he said, where "we've been playing twice a week. It's a lot of fun. More people should come out, and it's a trend. Three years ago, it wasn't available, and now everybody's doing it.

"So I see you've got one at Weed Beach. Really, there's a whole bunch of tennis courts. I think you should try to use more of those for pickleball. It's just line painting [to convert a tennis court to one for pickleball]. It's nothing."

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Michael Savino told the commission that it would be easier for people using ball courts in town (whether they're for tennis, paddleball or pickleball) if the courts were all in one place. Otherwise, some players could be waiting for a court to be freed up at one place while others go unused, elsewhere.

Even at Weed Beach, he said, people waiting for tennis courts, some of which are located in different parts of the park, need to go back and fourth between the two areas to see when a court is free.

"If you're going to do pickleball, and if you've got it at Cherry Lawn," he said, "do more pickleball there."

Pear Tree Point Beach

Concept A

Improvements would be made to the parking lot.

The lifeguard station and comfort station would be moved or replaced to one on the eastern end of the parking area, "really recreating that space for concessions and restrooms, away from the beach space itself," Biggs said, "really to encourage the access and connections between the two beach parts of the park."

"This concept would add an additional pier that would look out into the harbor, adding additional shade structures and vegetation to restore the green side of the parking area," he continued.

An area of dune grass would be added in the beach area, he said. "This is not only a visual improvement, but also, during storm events, as you all know from the recent hurricanes coming through" with rushing wind and water. "We're trying to protect the resources behind a wall, and dune grasses provide a more natural way to mitigate [damage] from storm surges."

Concept B

"Concept B retains the existing comfort station/concession building, which is in the middle of the two beach areas. By enhancing that and providing an outdoor seating area [...] and a pier that could go off the jetty. [...]"

"This would offset any of the increased erosion that's happening in these areas."

Next Steps

The second of two Parks and Recreation Commission public hearings on the draft proposals will be held Oct. 4 in the Auditorium of Darien Town Hall.

The master plan, once voted on by the commission, would need further votes, including votes by the Board of Selectmen, Board of Finance and Representative Town Meeting, before any major changes are made to parks or recreation programs, although minor changes might not need approval from the RTM or Board of Finance.

Anyone with ideas or proposals for the master plan or questions about it is encouraged to email Parks and Recreation Director Pamela Gery at pgery@darienct.gov or Commission Chairman Mary Flynn at mflynn@darienct.gov.

To Find Out More

Many of the images in a set of slides presented by the consultants on Wednesday are posted [on this Web page](#) of the town government website, and the meeting was videotaped by Darien TV79.

Some of the maps in the online version of the slide presentation are blurry and hard to read. For those even more interested (or concerned) about ideas for particular parks, or who want an even better view of the maps, they are all on display now through Oct. 11 in the first-floor hallway of Darien Town Hall, open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday.

See the Sept. 20 Presentation

See the whole public hearing in this Darien TV79 video:

[Parks & Recreation 9-20-17](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).