

**Deerfield Park District  
Mitchell Park Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes  
August 27, 2020**

Meeting came to order at 7:08 p.m.

Present: Alan Baruch, Loren Rivkin, Chris Goodsnyder, Joel Seeskin, Hazel Herzog, Jake Kraemer, Debbie Serota, Richard Shay, Christine Digrazia, Ellyce Rumick, Suzan Hawkinson, Graham Ambrose, Gale Gand, Dan Shapiro, Alyson Feiger, Katie Bittner, Niki Antonakos, Jean Spagnoli, Ken Abosch, Rick Patinkin, Jeff Nehila

**Welcome and Introductions**

Executive Director Nehila welcomed committee members.

Committee members provided a brief introduction of themselves and reason for wanting to be part of this committee.

**Purpose of Committee**

The committee was formed with three main goals. To recommend a new name for Mitchell Park, to propose other ways to honor James Mitchell and to develop educational proposals to accurately teach the history of the integration issues time period in Deerfield in collaboration with numerous agencies and citizens.

**Recap of Feedback by Committee Members**

Loren asked if the committee was restricted in recommending a new name for the park but not the pool. He also asked if the pool name is remaining does the committee need to come up with other ways to honor him. Director Nehila responded the park board did vote to only change the name of the park. It doesn't mean that changing the name of the pool can't be discussed as it ties in with other ways to recognize James Mitchell. Ultimately the choice is the park board so having options available for them would be preferred.

Loren stated that he is not interested in naming the park after another individual. He wants to be a realist and since Deerfield isn't diverse at this time, calling the park Diversity Park isn't realistic. He likes the name Floral Park as that gives an idea of what it would have been if the development had been completed. Milgram Floral Park would also be a good name as it incorporates the name of the developer and it was a concerted effort to integrate Deerfield. In his opinion, if the pool name remains then that would be sufficient recognition for James Mitchell. As for the educational program, it is critical that the curriculum is developed with age appropriateness in mind.

Jean stated that the Historical Society discussed the three goals of the committee. While many Historical Society members were not in favor of changing the name, name suggestions discussed by the committee were Flora Park and Progress Park. Jean stated that it is very important to tell the whole story through the lens of the time not current times. She also commented that the Historical Society would like to partner with the park district or another entity to secure storage space. Maybe one of the homes on Wilmot could be turned into a museum. The Historical Society thanked the park district for their attention to this matter and for all of our beautiful parks.

Jake stated that he believes the park name should be specific to an individual or entity who have had an impact locally. He feels that keeping the pool named after James Mitchell is a fine idea but we should have a public acknowledgement to provide citizens with information on what James Mitchell was about and to let them know the committee made a deliberate decision to keep the pool named after him. As far as the educational aspect, there should be a high school curriculum developed around Art Shay's photographs and should be taught in all levels of U.S. History.

Niki read her statement previously sent in. The DHS Social Studies department recommends Beverly Park as their top choice for the new name. This name will allow people in town to peel back the layers of history, opening conversations about the fraught history of the 1959 housing case and how individuals and groups had and can change the town's history. They concur with school district 109 and their rationale for choosing this name as a way to center the role of people of color in the town's history. And as a way to expand our understanding of Deerfield's place in the Civil Rights Movement. We can study the role of upstanders including Dr.'s Eve and Sherman Beverly, and the many other individuals and groups who worked to change the trajectory of the town. Using documents archived at the Deerfield Public Library, we can trace the influence and steady work of activists. The expression "It Takes a Village" comes alive when we examine the many people involved in the work of making Deerfield a more open community. The sign that would go along with the park's new name should also be accompanied by a plaque presenting this community-based history. So that while we choose the singular name Beverly for the park, the role of the community people in the opposition to integration and it's growing work in support of integration can and must be included on whatever signage we put up to explain the park's name and history. By renaming the park we gain an opportunity to create a space where the local and national story of the Civil Rights Movement past and present, can be featured. In light of this, our second and third name choices would be Gibson Park, after an African American teacher in Deerfield, and Nicholson Park that would represent an early Deerfield black family. In terms of honoring James Mitchell, if there isn't an overview of his contributions on public display that should be created. Niki commented that she likes Jean's idea of creating a museum. People in the Social Studies Department were surprised that the renaming didn't include the pool. Some people think that keeping the name on the pool would bring a second round of scrutiny. It seems that taking the name Mitchell and putting it in a place where you can show what his work is would be a better way to honor him. As for education purposes, Deerfield High School has been teaching the history but maybe not in a manner that students remember. Deerfield High School's U.S. History classes began the school year with the Deerfield Housing case.

Suzan stated that the trouble with naming a park, or this park in particular, after a person, is that the name itself doesn't tell a story. If you don't recognize the name or don't know the story behind it, you are left uninspired by it. Do we want the name of the park to be a person, only historical or might it be aspirational, lifting up the values that we've learned even from our collective mistakes? One thing she likes about something that would include all the names is that it takes a community to make a mistake this big and it takes a community to remedy a mistake this big. She also thinks how we need a park as a way to convey something to the community and the watching world something that we would want to honor and aspire to but also something that we wouldn't want apologize for. She's not sure of the name but she thinks about Memory and Hope. Trying to capture the idea that we remember, and we are also not captured by that memory, we are people who are making progress. Suzan commented that it has

been mentioned that there will be controversy with Mr. Mitchell's name anywhere. She put a vote in for how positive it would be to raise that controversy. Part of the problem with removing James Mitchell's name from the park is that it creates a potential scapegoat situation. Where a single person is sent out of the community, so to speak, in order to inapt the penance of the whole community so the rest of us can be perceived as having clean hands. When in fact the vote at that time clearly indicates that 2/3 of the community were responsible for the referendum. The Mitchell name should be kept because of his personal history, not for the park because that would no longer be an honoring. She can't imagine the Mitchell family or James Mitchell himself, if he had an opportunity to say, would want to have it remain the name the way the conversations are going now. How do we make sure that the name stays in place so the community remembers that it wasn't one person who did this but that we all carry some of the weight of it. Suzan believes that the education component is essential. She would like to tie the story that's told about this particular community with the larger global issues not just historical but also aspirational. As we watch other communities and other peoples who raise better ways to courageously become inclusive, more diverse and to celebrate that we would want to tie those stories to those opportunities and the brave folks that took them.

Chris commented that it is problematic, of late, when you see what happens when you honor someone with a statue or facility, and they have some contemporaneous issues in their life that calls into question their worthiness. This could be problematic and therefore he is not in favor of naming the park after a person. He suggested having a scannable feature at the park that would take interested people to the story online. Chris mentioned a mentorship program for children so they would be in a position to hold better jobs and create better futures. If we partner with other civic organizations to offer mentorships, scholarships and resources to under resourced communities we can provide people with the same opportunities that were afforded to our children. Chris commented that he is less concerned about finding the perfect name and feels that just the process of revisiting the issues really acknowledges what happened in 1959. He doesn't want this to be a passing thing but have people have real opportunity to improve their lives.

Joel commented that he liked all the suggestions sent in but had a suggestion to name the park, Barry Bradford Park or Bradford Park. He's a Deerfield resident and was a 21-year teacher at Stevenson. He is probably best known for leading two teams of students to reopen two very infamous cold cases during the Civil Rights era. He's been given many awards for his teaching throughout his career. Joel thinks that the committee considering someone like Barry is both current and relevant. Even though our community is 94% -95% white, we are a community that supports and exhibits tolerance and is committed to racial justice and equality. As far as honoring Mr. Mitchell, certainly the pool is an option. He feels that if we are going to change the name of the park and don't change the pool name, we are opening up ourselves to questions about how and why we came to that decision. Since James Mitchell was the person that suggested the July 4 Family Days maybe they could tie his name into that community event. Joel commented that he is not a teacher and would be interested to hear from and take direction from the educators. But he feels that it's important to be upfront and honest about what happened in 1959. Tell the true story about what happened and not try to villainize anyone. James Mitchell did a lot for our community and we all enjoy the beautiful parks, but we all know that what happened in 1959 was wrong.

Ellyce feels that James Mitchell did so much for the community. The group wants to remove his name yet honor him. She can't imagine how the family must feel. O'Hare Airport was named after Buddy O'Hare who was Al Capone's attorney. We didn't rename the airport. She doesn't think we should take away Mr. Mitchell's honor of all his devotion. He was doing something good not bad. She can't go along with changing the name. Where will this stuff end, it could go on and on. People need to move on with their lives and do something right.

Gale commented that her ideas for a new name are Beverly Park, Lyman Wilmot Park and Rev. Russell Bletzer Park, (he was one of six clergy that wrote letters in support of integration in Deerfield in 1959). The problem with the last two is that they are a couple of white guys and she doesn't think we should name it after another white guy. Another name idea is Potawatomi Park. She suspects that the land was owned by indigenous people before others came and acquired the land. She's wondering if we can right two wrongs by going back even further in our history and honoring the indigenous people that lived here hundreds of years ago. There is a Potawatomi Park in Chicago already if that would make a difference. As far as the educational component we have a myriad of experts on the committee that could help implement it in the schools and the Historical Society. We could have a plaque at the park explaining the history as well as on the model homes. When she was filming with TV stations this summer, they were surprised to find out that the two model homes were there. She stated that when Alec wrote the letter about changing the name of Mitchell Park that also included the pool. She was flabbergasted that the two were separated. That property is the wrong place to honor James Mitchell. That piece of property has a toxic history. If the pool name isn't changed there will be an uprising. There are a lot of other parks that can be named after him to honor his work. It's the wrong association, it does the opposite of honor him. It associates him with something we are all having trouble coping with, something we are ashamed of and we are not taking responsibility for. We need to show the future that we did take responsibility when we had the chance.

Hazel stated that her main concern is about teaching the history. She doesn't want it to be just about the incident at Mitchell Park. Unfortunately, Deerfield has a history of not being very diverse or accepting. Going back to Mitchell Park, her feeling is that James Mitchell was in charge and is responsible. She stated that she is in favor of changing the name. She recounted a story that happened in 1958-59. A friend of hers was in college and spending the summer working in Chicago. When the protests began, he attended and met two African American boys that came to the protests but missed the last train to Chicago, so he offered them to stay at his house. Everything was fine until 3:00 a.m. when they woke up to a cross burning on their lawn. Hazel recounted a story of two women coming to her door with a petition to have all the students in Briarwood Vista attend Kipling in Deerfield instead of Sherwood in Highland Park and not have the option for high school to attend either Deerfield or Highland Park High Schools. She asked them why they would do this. They stated that because there was too much diversity in Highland Park. This was only about 15 years ago. At the time, Hazel was in charge of the English as a Second Language program in Highland Park. She quickly told the women what bigots they were. Hazel commented that her main concern is the teaching of not only what happened with Mitchell Park but what else was happening in Deerfield and to be aware of that in the education.

Debbie commented that her first thought when seeing some of the suggested names was the unintended consequences of naming the park after a white person at this point. She commented that

she doesn't know much about the Beverly's but knows the name has come as a symbol. She would like to know more about the family and their experiences in Deerfield. She thinks the Potawatomi name is good and it would be a nice land acknowledgement. In terms of honoring James Mitchell, she has to admit the words "honoring James Mitchell" makes her uncomfortable. There's no doubt he brought so much to the parks in Deerfield and the parks are a huge park of what makes Deerfield so wonderful. There are ways to appreciate his contributions and to attribute his positive contributions to him. She has heard it said maybe he was an opportunist at worst, but we have a much better understanding of white supremacy culture now than we did in the past. There's a saying, "when you know better you do better". While she thinks it's always important to talk about the history in the context of that time, it is also important to take those learnings and understand that opportunist, it was problematic of him taking the opportunity to condemn the land. To say he was racist, he wasn't racist, is too simplistic. We have an understanding of privilege and white supremacy culture that we didn't back then. She liked the idea Niki brought up about green space and honoring his contribution in that way. Maybe naming the community center after him would be a meaningful choice. As for education, she feels that the high school has always done a great job of taking the history that often develops outside of our bubble and bringing it home and bringing it real to us. She would be in support of anything the high school Social Studies Department puts forward. Having a plaque in the park, formally known as Mitchell Park, would be a really important piece to the history. She echoed that keeping the name on the pool would defeat the purpose. She thinks that the pool and park are one in the same and both names need to be changed.

Alan stated that he loves the idea of Beverly Park. The first black family that moved here. He wonders what it was like for them. The courage it showed to move to a predominately white area. He is in favor of the park being named after someone with courage and pride for being in Deerfield. He has discomfort about honoring James Mitchell as well.

Christine stated that District 109 likes the name Beverly Park. She likes the name of a person because you get more of a historical feel and then you tell the story. She feels that we should be educating elementary and middle school children as well. The 109 board will be creating a curriculum committee and discussing how they are teaching this history. It is very important to honor the history of what happened.

Ken commented that he was coming into this struggling with the congruity of striking an individual's recognition for a park or pool but then identifying some other opportunity in the community to recognize this individual. He's hearing and learning that this is about the property of Mitchell not the person. If that's accurate, it sounds like the damage that has been done historically with regard to the property requires that Mitchell's name be removed from that property completely and we seek another opportunity to recognize the tremendous contributions that Mitchell has made to the community elsewhere. Maybe even including his name in association with the park district. He believes there is going to be a PR challenge no matter what we do especially if we take his name off the park and use it in some other way. That's where the education aspect comes in to play. That will be a challenge to explain but also maybe an opportunity for Deerfield to really fully understand the history that occurred here. As for the name going forward, he either likes going back to the Flora property because that restores it back to where it was at the time. This would require an explanation as to why we are using that name

which would be an educational opportunity. He'd prefer alternatively to use an ideal as a name for the park as opposed to a person.

Rick stated that being somewhat of a student of parks and recreation, one individual comes to mind and a quote related to him, and that's Daniel Burnham, and his quote is, "Make no little plans." Everyone that lives in Chicago recognizes the result of his vision. This is an opportunity for us to make no little plans. One of the reasons we have a representative from each body politic is because he hopes to do something collaborative to address the utmost paramount issue of education on this. Rick commented that no one is more passionate about Civil Rights than he is. It's something he believes in. One other thing he believes in is the value of museums. He sees an opportunity here. The park district has 60-year-old houses that it's throwing money into to maintain. At some point it won't be worth it to maintain them, right now they are rental properties. He's not speaking for the board just on his behalf. Previously he had said to Jeff, does the Historical Society have a repository for all their stuff? We've learned tonight that they are storing stuff in the second floor at St. Gregory's Church. We live in the city of Chicago which has a terrible history for segregation. Now we have an opportunity to educate not only our community but the whole community and provide a possible place for that to be done on the sight that was the issue of all of this. The fact that we have representatives in each body politic in this meeting now, his suggestion is that they each set aside some part of their budgets to establish and maintain a museum on that site in the future and we can educate the community. And we can get past the terrible history that took place in Deerfield. Rick commented that he is very conflicted about this. Just like Daniel Burnham, James Mitchell made no little plans. James Mitchell was responsible for a lot of the parks and virtually all of the school sites as well. James Mitchell knew what was coming before the 1959 issues and planned out a community. Rick asked if the committee makes a suggestion and the board votes rejects it, is he going to be remembered as the person that made the wrong decision? It wasn't James Mitchell who held the referendum, he was the park board president. Rick is very conflicted with the negative attitude with respect to James Mitchell. There's no question that to the Village of Deerfield and the people at that time it was a major issue, and it was wrong and it shouldn't have been. Right now during the pandemic, as Rick walks around town with his family and sees all the parks teeming with activity because they are all community parks, this was a result of James Mitchell's vision. People need to understand that the community wanted Briarwood, at that time known as Briargate Country Club, to be acquired in a referendum. James Mitchell who sat on the board at that time, was against that because he wanted to establish parks throughout the village and schools to be at those sites. Rick knows some committee members don't agree with him in terms of this and the name itself is a bad connotation in respect to that place, but Rick still believes he needs to be honored. Rick likes the idea of naming the community center for him or the park district. He doesn't know how the other board members are going to feel about it.

Chris commented that from reading Graham's thesis, he spoke to a tax issue that seemed to be a partial driving force as to why the land acquisitions didn't get done earlier in the year. It sounded like Mr. Mitchell was against the expenditure from the earlier opportunities to purchase the land. Chris deferred to Rick regarding wanting to spread purchases around the town. But Chris's read on that and how it turned on a dime when the Floral Park situation came to be known, seems as that would be the smoking gun in terms of cause and effect of what the true motivation was for the people who made the decision. They literally flipped a third of the population from being against the acquisition to for it and got it done

in lightning speed. Chris agrees that the name needs to be removed from both the park and the pool. Obviously, we are all grateful for the parks, but we can't have blinders on about what was done at the time and what their true motivations were.

Rick commented that the motivations were the motivations of the village at large, not one man. Gale commented that it was being spurred on by the Reverend at St. Gregory's Church telling people that property values near that piece of land were going to go down. He was asking Milgram to escrow money for five years including interest to pay back people for their property reduction. Rick commented that it wasn't James Mitchell doing that. He was the park board president who had a vision. Gale commented that it was the first penny of the dime it turned on. Jean commented that at the village board meeting a realtor testified that the overall value of the community would go down. Another woman that came from another development that the developer did testified that their property values did go down and whites left. This created fear in Deerfield that their property values would go down.

Jean commented that the developer was very secretive, and no one knew what was going on. Gale stated that they weren't secretive.

Rick expressed his conflict on this whole subject of James Mitchell. James Mitchell literally shaped our village and Rick wants it understood that he did not shape it as a white community. James Mitchell's goal was to make no small plans, he had plans for the community. Was he an opportunist when he could finally get those other six parcels? Yes, he was.

Loren commented that those aren't, of course, mutually exclusive. Yes, he shaped our community with the lands we have. Yes, he might have contributed to shaping it as a white community. Those are not mutually exclusive if that was ultimately the end result. It appears to be a consensus among the group that a recognition of him may be appropriate. It seems that his name tied to that property right now makes it a hot button.

Loren stated that from a procedural perspective what the board passed specifically states the name stays on the pool. What does that do to this task group? Are we supposed to look at it from an open perspective, then this goes back to the board to consider something else? How does that go when that's what the board passed? Rick suggested that this group make a recommendation and take it to the board and then the board will make a decision. Loren asked if that would include an override of the decision to rename the pool? Rick responded that he can't answer with certainty but what's the harm in making the recommendation. Loren doesn't want the group to go down a path that is destined for rejection because it wasn't what the board passed as the mission for the group. Niki commented that in the notes it looks like only one board member voted with that stipulation and one voted against totally.

Rick commented that Jeff is a fine facilitator and administrator and can navigate the group through this.

Jeff explained the process and where the group goes from here. Through the evidence of discussion tonight, such as the idea for the museum he can create the process. This has been a fabulous discussion and now the group needs time to absorb and reflect. He encouraged the group to read materials relative to the topic as well as the history posted on the website. Rick commented that it has been made known

by some commissioners that they have no interest in naming the park after another person. The group's recommendation can include a person but understand that the predisposition already exists among one or more park board members. Jeff will make a brief recap and tally potential names. Jeff asked Niki to share the curriculum information with the group. Niki responded that there's a link in the letter she sent that can be forwarded to the group. Gale mentioned that another part of the education part might include a formal apology from the village for the past. Jeff responded that he feels that an apology should be discussed as a group. He commented that this is an opportunity for continued off shoots such as the sister city idea. Glencoe Park District does something similar with children in Waukegan. These are additional results that could come out of this. He will write up a synopsis about some additional opportunities and the group can think about others. He wants to stay focused on the task at hand. The ideas can be included in a long-term plan. He's hearing that this isn't an immediate reflection and fix. It has to be progressive and continue. The educational component not only in the school but in the community, the plaques at the park, if there's a museum, there's a lot of different opportunities that can be produced by the committee. These are options down the road the group can focus on. This is not going to be a two- or three-month process, but he would like to get to certain place in a certain amount of time. The process will be defined now that he has heard all the opinions of the group and knowing there isn't a consensus and try to find some common element. He will send out the tallies for the name, ways to honor James Mitchell and whether to include the pool or not. Jeff will send out the information from Niki and Katie, so the group knows the educational components being taught at the schools. He would like to go back to the first two things on the task list. Maybe discussion on the park naming, the pool and alternate ways to honor James Mitchell would be a tighter framework for the next meeting. Also, the group can review the educational materials provided by Niki and Katie and discuss at the next meeting. Jeff doesn't want the group to be overwhelmed by too many ideas and no progressive way to address each one. If the group has any ideas about the educational component, please send to Jeff by the middle of next week so he can compile them.

Loren asked if there was any guidance or policy for discussing with the community. Jeff commented that the group can certainly discuss with the community and sharing ideas to the community buy in. Rick commented that he agrees with Jeff and also asked the group to please not ask the community at large to inundate the park board with emails. This is a public meeting and the community can listen in.

Jeff polled the committee for their availability on Thursday, September 10. The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, September 10 at 7:00 p.m. via Zoom.

#### **Matters from the Public**

Gale read an email received from Jimmy Seidita regarding renaming Mitchell Park and Mitchell Pool.

Loren asked for a committee listing with contact information. Jeff will provide.

The being no further discussion, meeting adjourned at 10:08 p.m.