

## **Open Work Session**

### **Proposed Fee Increases to Recreation Programs**

**April 6, 2021**

Mr. Steve Miller, Director of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism; Ms. Katie Rouse, Deputy Director of Recreation, Parks, and Tourism; and James Simmons, Recreation Superintendent, came before Council. Ms. Rouse said they are here to talk about proposed fee increases for some of their recreation programs. She said, as Council is aware, the minimum wage increased at the beginning of this year to \$11.75 an hour, which is one of two major factors they considered when deciding what to set their fee rates at for the upcoming fiscal year. She said, in addition to the minimum wage, they have COVID regulations for their childcare programs that they have to meet to operate the sites, which affect both the number of children they can accommodate at each site and the required staff members at each site.

Mr. Simmons said they keep an eye on other camps in the County and their prices when it comes to childcare programs, and Wicomico averages about 25 percent less than the majority of programs. He said their mission is to provide an affordable option for folks, and they have a great scholarship program in place in partnership with a couple of outside nonprofits that help fund that annually, so if someone has trouble meeting the registration fee, there are some opportunities to be able to help them out.

Mr. Holloway asked if any COVID funding has come their way due to the COVID obligations, to which Ms. Rouse responded, they received some CARES Act funding when they ran the learning center at the Civic Center, but as far as the summer camps go, they have not received anything at this time. Mr. Holloway clarified, they have not received anything to help out with this, to which Ms. Rouse responded, no.

Mrs. Acle said people are looking at alternative childcare because parents cannot go back to work and kids are still not in school. She said, in the beginning of COVID they had a childcare center set up briefly, but she thinks that is going to be coming down the line again because they are still not back in school fulltime and parents need to get back to work. She said she is wondering if there is more COVID funding that could allow for them to do that, to which Mr. Simmons responded, they certainly can look into reopening a program like that, and they will definitely take that into consideration. He said people need to get back to work and they hope their summer camps can serve in that capacity this summer, but who knows what the fall will bring, or the rest of the spring, so that is definitely something they can look at.

Mr. Cannon asked if this will come in front of Council with the fiscal year 2022 budget, or are they planning to do any increases before that time, to which Ms. Rouse responded, the summer camps kind of straddle the fiscal year and the registration for the camps is open now, so they are currently collecting fees at the increased rate. She said, if the fees are not approved, their plan is that they will be refunding the difference back to the people who have already registered for the camps. She clarified, the karate and junior golf will not go into effect until July 1. Mr. Cannon asked if there will be Legislation before the Council, to which Mrs. Hurley responded, yes, this definitely has to come back for Council approval.

Mrs. Hurley asked if these fees are for existing programs, or is there anything brand new, to which Ms. Rouse responded, there are no new programs, but something new is that they will be offering before and after care with their summer camps. She explained, it is basically just an extension of the hours, and there would be an additional fee for campers who want to take advantage of that. Mrs. Hurley said this will definitely need to come back to Council for approval, and they hope to have that ready within the next couple of meetings.

Mr. Hastings said, for anyone listening, he is looking at over 100 different fees the County charges for different programs and things they offer, and there are only a couple of changes and only a minor amount of increases here and there. He said, at first glance he did not understand where there were any changes because it looked the same as before, but there are a few, and he appreciates their work.

Mr. Dodd said what he saw were minor changes due to the wage increase, but then when looking at the Westside Community Center membership for youth and the community, it looks like it went from an annual fee of \$225 to what would end up being \$600, to which Mr. Simmons responded, it ends up being roughly \$450. He explained, that is actually a typo on the list they gave Council, and it should read Westside Community Center After School Program for a nine-month period. He said they are looking to transition that to a monthly fee. He said, when they look at those numbers, obviously affordable care is what they are looking to do, and in that section of the community they have always tried to keep the prices as low as possible. He said, when they look at those numbers, it ends up being roughly a third of what the Kids Club Program would be keeping it significantly affordable.

Mr. Holloway asked if Ms. Rouse said they are already charging these increased fees, to which Ms. Rouse responded, they had to open registration, so at this point they are. She said, if it is not approved, their plan is that they will refund the difference back to the campers. Mr. Holloway said his question is, if they were planning on charging these increased fees, why did this not come to the Council earlier? He clarified, he has not had any questions from the public about this, but there could have been questions from the public about increased fees and the Council would not have known anything about it, so he was wondering why this did not come to the Council before they started doing it. He said he supposes they assumed it will be approved, but they will have to go through the process of returning money if it is not approved. He then asked why they decided to do that, and did somebody give them the approval to do that, to which Ms. Rouse responded, basically they were not sure if they were going to be able to have the summer camps until very, very recently. She explained, with the COVID regulations, it all kind of happened very fast and they were at a point where they were not even sure if they were going to be able to do the programs, and they wanted to get registration open for people as soon as possible so they could have care options for the summer. She said they looked at several options as far as what they would have to do to fix it if they did not get the prices approved, such as giving the refunds instead of going back to people and asking for more money later after they had already registered, and they felt that giving a refund was a more palatable option. Mr. Holloway asked who authorized them to go ahead and start charging more, to which Ms. Rouse referred to Mr. Miller.

Mr. Miller said they worked with the Finance Office as far as process. He said, as Ms. Rouse mentioned, the real challenge with this particular case is that the bulk of the summer programming is in FY22, so it is tricky because they are registering for the camps now, but it is for the next fiscal year. He said, to Mr. Holloway's point on the timing, he thinks Mr. Holloway is right, and in an ideal world this would have been done over the winter before it was time for registration; however, as Ms. Rouse noted, most things have been uncertain, and they just did not know to what extent the requirements would be for staffing, and all of that impacts what they have to charge. He said it was late, and he will take responsibility for that, but they felt like this was the most appropriate recommendation they could make.

Mr. McCain said he appreciates Mr. Miller's answer because he knows these are unusual times. He said a month ago they may not have known if they could have these programs or what it would look like, and he understands that is challenging. He said they all want to plan, but it is hard to plan when the parts are

moving on a daily basis, so he understands that. Mr. Miller responded, it has been a challenge for them and the public as well. He said they are trying to accommodate and provide programs safely, but also not have the extra burdens run away from them where they have to come back to the Council and the Executive to ask for increased appropriations, so they are trying to strike a balance, and it is a challenge.

Mrs. Acle said she appreciates Mr. Miller acting quickly on this because she knows parents are really scrambling right now and desperately trying to find childcare for now and for the summer, so she sees the urgency in getting that together.

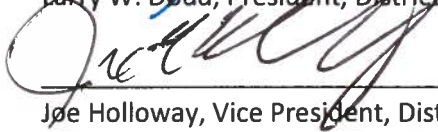
Mr. Cannon said desperate times take desperate measures, and he is so glad to see that they put aside red tape just for one time to make this happen because, as everyone said, it is unpredictable. He said something had to be done, and they did it, and he applauds them for that.

Mr. Dodd said, when his kids were at North Salisbury School the Kids Club was an excellent program. He said his kids did not participate in anything during the summer, but he would assume the summer camps are just as great as that program was, so he would highly recommend Kids Club if families need it.

Mr. Dodd asked Mrs. Hurley when this will come back before Council, to which Mrs. Hurley responded, she will work with Mr. Wilber on getting either a Resolution or a Legislative Bill drafted for Council's consideration. There was no further discussion.



Larry W. Dodd, President, District 3



Joe Holloway, Vice President, District 5



John T. Cannon, At-Large



William R. McCain, At-Large



Ernest F. Davis, District 1



Nicole Acle, District 2



Josh Hastings, District 4



Laura Hurley, Council Administration