

Proposal for a League Study of the Park District of Highland Park.

I would like the League of Women Voters to do a “report card” on the Park District of Highland Park. How does it compare to neighboring communities? What are areas that could be improved? What are areas of excellence? Should anything about its governing structure be changed? In its annual reports and budgets the Park District compares its current and past performance but never gives the context of other communities. The League is in a unique position to do a study to provide this context and make recommendations.

Comparison to Other Communities

From a quick look at the annual reports from a few other North Shore communities I have constructed the table below. This is just the beginning of the data which would need to be collected for such a study but it appears that in comparison to our neighbors our Park District:

- Owns a lot more land
- Has more full time staff
- Spends a lot per capita

But these numbers have to be looked at in context. Perhaps we have more full time staff because we have more programs and more participation. How do our programs and facilities compare to our neighbors?

We should also look at the national picture and best practices guidelines.

Private and non-profit organizations such as Lake Forest Open Lands and private day camps also change the picture.

In the past few years suburbs like Highland Park have had a population change – there are proportionally more older people and fewer families with young children. How has programming changed in response to demographic shifts?

	acres/1000	expend/capita	expend/acre	full time	f.t/1000	part time	acres	population	expenditure
National Benchmark data									
nrpa upper quartile	15.9	183	28,165						
communities where Parks are a separate unit of government									
Highland Park	25.52	1,029	40,317	94	3.17		756	29,622	30,480,000
wilmette	11.96	1,172	97,941	70	2.58	1000	324	27,087	31,733,000
northbrook	15.03	480	31,924	73	2.15	700	511	34,000	16,313,000
communities where Parks are a department within City Government									
lake Forest	21.78	560	25,716	41	2.12	329	422	19,375	10,852,000
evanston	3.60	161	44,776				268	74,486	12,000,000

Structuring the Parks and Recreation Function

Governance is also an important issue. In Lake Forest and Evanston, Parks and Recreation is a City Department, like police, fire or public works, under the direction of the City Council. In Highland Park, Wilmette, Northbrook and most other North Shore communities, Parks and Recreation is a separate entity with its own elected officials and taxing authority. It's my understanding that Illinois is one of the few states that allow Parks and Recreation to be a separate taxing authority. Do we want to continue to have a separate Park District or would we be better served by folding the Parks function into City government? It used to be that the City owned the park land and park buildings and what we think of as the Park District was responsible for running the programs

Another aspect of governance is the number of commissioners and their term of office. We have 5 commissioners serving 6 year terms. Commissioners get no remuneration except they don't have to pay for park district programs How does that compare to our neighbors?

Highwood does not offer recreation programs. It is part of District 112 but not part of the HP Park District and Highwood residents must pay non-resident fees. Is there interest on Highwood's part in becoming part of Highland Park's park district? How would such a change come about?

Employment Packages

About 15 years ago Highland Park was scandalized by overly generous retirement/severance packages given to some Park District employees. How has that changed? I'd like to look at the salaries, pensions and severance given to senior employees in the last few years and again compare the results with neighboring communities.

Covid-19

Last winter, when I started thinking about doing this kind of study, a pandemic was not on the horizon. But we'd be remiss if we undertook a study of the Park District without thinking about Covid-19's lasting effects. Has everything changed? For how long? Whether or not a vaccine is found, will young families decide that a lower density, suburban life style is preferable to the higher density of Chicago?

Background for Preparing this Proposal

I have a Master's in City Planning and I've worked in both the public sector and as a consultant. Since I'm retired, I have the time to chair a committee to do this study.

I have talked to some City Staff and some City Council members (past and present). They have all said a study such as this would be worth doing. I have not talked to anyone at the Park District. I have talked to one current League member who said she'd be interested in working on this study. I have also talked to several League members who felt that since they have professional relationships with the Park District they would not want to be part of the committee writing the report but they thought it was a good idea.

I think doing this study would attract new members to the League because so many residents care deeply about the Park District and its programs. The committee might not reach consensus in all the areas that we'd be looking in to, but I'm confident that we would be able to produce a set of recommendations worthy of a public discussion.

Submitted by Jean Sogin