

Starke County Parks Department
Park Board Minutes
October 10, 2023

Present: R. Ballard, T. Busch, K. Swihart, R. Ritzler & S. Byer

The meeting was called to order by President Richard Ballard at 6:00 PM

R. Ritzler motioned, seconded by S. Byer to accept the minutes from the September 12, 2023 minutes, T. Busch motioned to accept the minutes from the September 26, 2023 Special Session, seconded by R. Ritzler. Both passed unanimously.

Due to the significant increases to the costs for operations, taxes, insurance, 25% inflation, R. Ballard announced the intent to make the following changes to the 2024 Seasonal Camper Lease Agreement:

Proposed changes to Seasonal Camper Lease Agreement and Weekend Campers 2024

Rates:

Increase seasonal rate from \$2,300.00 to \$3,000.00

Late payment fee from \$50.00 flat fee to \$25.00 per day

Winter camper storage fee from \$300.00 to \$350.00

Add requirement to remove **ALL** personal property from their sites with the exception of Permanent carpets, decks, gazebos, stairs, wood piles, currently approved storage sheds, Landscape blocks, rocks and wood or composite picnic tables

Back Storage Campers may pay a fee of \$100 per season to store a golf cart or jet ski in the back area of the campground. Nothing else may be stored there

Prohibit outside refrigerators or freezers

Add allowing the addition of one golf cart along with 1 licensed motor vehicle on site

Beach access: Campers and guests **MUST** show a valid seasonal pass to enter the beach. Without one, the gate fee will be charged

To strongly recommend each camper to install a pressure reduction regulator on their water valve and a surge protector for the electrical

Internet usage: Free Wi-Fi is available at no charge as a convenience. It is not nor will be guaranteed for gaming, streaming movies via any streaming service, etc. If dependent on these

services it is recommended you acquire your own service. Violators will be removed or slowed down from the Wi-Fi usage

Notice of vacating: It is the Camper's responsibility to notify the Parks Dept. by February 1st.
If not intending to renew a lease for the following season
Campsites WILL NOT be offered to new purchaser of someone selling their camper

Dumping of grass clipping, leaves, ashes, etc. are only permitted in the back-burn area NO dumping of these items permitted on the perimeter of the wooded areas.

Non-seasonal Rates:

Water & electric camp sites from:

From \$45.00 to \$50.00 per night (\$55.00 holiday & event 3-night minimum)

From \$270.00 to \$300.00 per week

From \$450.00 to \$900.00 per month

Tent Sites

From \$20.00 to \$25.00 per night for primitive sites + \$5.00 for holiday & events

From \$25.00 to \$30.00 per night w/electric + \$5.00 for holiday & events, 3-night minimums

This was followed by a lengthy discussion from both attendees and the board. Many concerns were voiced regarding the campers not being able to absorb that large of an increase and information exchanged about how the department is funded. Todd Leinbach, Council member, stressed to the group that it is the Starke County Park Department, not the Bass Lake Park Department and is willing to consider requests for additional funding but that all of the county should benefit.

R. Ritzler motioned that a vote on the increase be tabled, contingent upon a committee being formed that will meet within a week, comprised of two campers, R. Ritzler, K. Swihart, T. Williams and A. Giuliani, to reevaluate and determine what increase will be reasonable. Seconded by K. Swihart and passed unanimously. Additional clarifications on site storage will be discussed with the newly formed committee and reported to the campers.

Many concerns were shared regarding the inadequacy of the current internet provided at the park. K. Swihart directed T. Williams to contact Mediacom to have them perform an on-site test of their equipment.

An open discussion from the seasonal campers was led by Keith Berry, a fellow camper, who presented the following questions and concerns voiced by many of the seasonal campers:

Starke County Park Board Meeting, Tuesday 10/10/2023 at 6:00 pm

Introduction:

My name is Keith Berry (Keith.Berry19@GMail.Com or (219) 662-7087 Mobile/Text) and my girlfriend Pam, and I currently own a 40 ft. 5th wheel camper, which is located on Lot # 29 at the Bass Lake

Campground. We are fairly new to the campground, as we have been camping there for approximately 3 seasons now.

I was recently asked to be a “spokesperson” for a fairly large group of current seasonal campers, so that their **concerns, questions, and thoughts** could be shared and relayed to the Starke County Commissioner’s, Council Members, and Park Board members and employees, so that they may be addressed, mitigated, and/or resolved.

Not all seasonal or other campers were present or notified, due to a variety of circumstances, to include being physically absent from the campground last weekend, the lack of phone numbers and/or e-mails to contact them, to inform them of the informal gathering, to obtain their concerns, questions, and thoughts.

It’s our hope that the following items below would include most, if not all of their concerns as well, but if they don’t, that they would have the opportunity to discuss their concerns, that were not mentioned, at the conclusion of our presentation or in the very near future, so they can be heard by this group.

In conclusion, the below items are NOT in any particular order or of greater importance than another item. They are numbered purely for numerical and tracking purposes. I would also like to ask ALL questions and comments from both the audience and Park Board, be held until the end of this presentation, so that meeting can continue in a quick and orderly manner.

Camper concerns, questions, and thoughts as of Saturday, 10/7/2023

1. Internet performance and connectivity is very poor and or non-existent at some campsites, even after recent upgrades/improvements that caused a significant monthly increase in the Mediacom bill. We are paying for a service/amenity that isn’t working for all campers, on all sites, regardless of location within the campground. Request that Mediacom be contacted and request that one of their Wireless Network engineers be scheduled for a site survey to be conducted, so a viable working wireless networking solution can be obtained for ALL campers. This estimate of purposed work by Mediacom should be presented to the Park Board, so they can determine what is cost effective solution to providing this amenity to the campers.
2. The waiting list for an open campground site should be posted in public area in the campground **and/or** published on the park board website, so everyone can see the list and make sure “line jumping” isn’t occurring and open sites are filled accordingly.
3. Boat slip assignments were rearranged and moved without legitimate justification and campers boat slips were given to non-campground people from around the lake. There are legitimate reasons people need to be on the outside, due to their boat’s characteristics.
4. How many people are on the current campground payroll. What are their individual job descriptions, and their duties in the campground and the beach area during camping season. What do they do on a daily, weekly, monthly basis during the camping season and what are their duties and work schedule during the offseason.
5. Transparency with daily, weekly, monthly campground operations.
6. Maintenance equipment and material that has been discussed and approved by the park board in previous years has not been purchased or planned to be purchased.

7. Campers have been self-sufficient and paid for/maintained our individual sites and some of the common areas, which can be and should be provided by maintenance staff of the park board and/or other county departments.
8. Current Rules are inconsistently enforced and/or interpreted by Park Board representatives. No direct conversation with violators and the decision makers about violations, to facilitate a remedy. Rules are subjective to interpretation by reviewer on what is allowed. No grievance or appeal process in place for campers to “voice” their concerns.
9. Why the price increase for next season and specific details that justify the increase.
10. Bass Lake Beach cost of operations and maintenance should be separated from campground. The campground should not be paying for the operation of the beach and vice versa.
11. Electric water heaters (40 gallon at the beach and a 120-gallon campground), lighting, and ventilation in both campground and beach restrooms **run 24/7 during season** and due to age are energy **inefficient**. Can this be reduced to a switched system/on demand to save on the cost of electricity.
12. Asking current camper to pay for site upgrades to electrical service to their site. This should a Capital expense forecasted and budgeted by the park board.
13. Are all donations received from the public (beach donation box) recorded every month, in the budget at the Auditor’s?
14. Are All Monies Generated by the Park Board from the beach and campground operations, being deposited into Starke County Government General Fund? This money is then being used to pay for all of the Park board’s expenses, to include non-income generating entities.
15. During monthly meetings, all campground and beach previous monthly expenditures are not read aloud or itemized for review by the public. Can this be done at every meeting?
16. Outside storage of outdoor furniture and with gazebo or not. This a change to the upcoming storage lease mid-season and less than 30 days before season and the notice of additional fees not a legal document. (\$200 additional penalty) All changes to the current should be made in the next lease, signed by and agreed to by the campers.
17. Additional fee for trailer storage during off season? Why? Justification? Seasonal campers should be credited for winter storage fee, for maintaining their site during season. No expense or man hours to the park board or county for this service.
18. Shed rules are inconsistent and not clear for everyone, should not be different for each site that currently has shed or not. “Grandfathered” ...
19. Burying steel and other items in hole in rear of the property, illegal and safety issues with people moving in that area.
20. Spending on money of piers, \$25000...then burning of those piers, because they could used for intended purpose, pumper truck pumping out the lift station \$7000 worth one issue sewage lift station upgrade of \$35,000 out of our budget should be a capital expenditure born by the county, as it is the county asset to maintain public access to these sites. (restrooms) Improper forecasting and budgeting of large expenses out of the current budget.
21. Preventative maintenance of infrastructure, not on a schedule or visible.
22. Removal of large tree stumps on sites and beach areas. No published plan to remove approximately 27 stumps at the beach and 20 stumps at the campground.

23. No need to move dump station to rear of campground. Unnecessary and money could be used for other campground improvements, such as the bath house.
24. Breakdown of Rental money is not shown on the financial report received from the auditor's office. Where is the money being recorded or deposited into?
25. No breakout of kayak and pavilion rentals for profit and loss evaluation.
26. Camper lease payments are made 2 times a year, can we make 3 equal payments, for the 2024 seasons?
27. Handicapped accommodations do not meet ADA compliance, shower seats, handicapped toilets, in campground bathrooms. Men's handicap showers have been inoperable for seven years and also women. Recent Inspectors passed bathrooms and obviously don't comply with ADA requirements. Results are not posted for public viewing, as to inspection results.
28. What is the Starke County policy regarding county employees consuming alcohol while on county property?
29. Are the people that are pulling campers out, are they guaranteed that they will get the same exact campsite, next season?
30. Emergency contact if park board employees not available or respond. Posting of on call person, for after-hours situations.
31. Volunteers are NOT being asked to help with campground and/or beach maintenance or even offer current Park Board staff members their help, throughout the camping season.
32. Can we create a Campground Association and hold monthly meetings BEFORE the monthly Park Board meeting? This would promote better communication with the Park Board, to make the campground and beach a better place.
33. Timeliness of decisions takes months to complete or get the process rolling. Season is over with, and nothing accomplished.
34. Other Campground rates comparisons are not equal in the same amenities and social amenities.
35. Seasonal Campers are **offended and feel threatened** by 2 Starke County government officials saying, "if you don't like it leave" and "if we don't like it, the county will just make a walking park out of it and get rid of the campground". An additional significant Cost will be born by county if not a campground. Campers feel like if they voice their concern or opinions, that they will be retaliated against, in some shape or form (Target on their back) or just plain ignored.
36. All of the campers that presented concerns and/or questions, would like to extend an "OPEN" invitation to any Starke County Commissioners, Council, or any Park Board member to visit and speak with any of the campers at the campground and/or the beach area. This will encourage personal familiarity and understanding of what is happening at these locations.
37. Rules for camping weekenders are published and displayed, so everyone is aware of what the rules are and report the violation to the appropriate park board employee on duty.
38. Lightning for roadway and walking areas.
39. Can a camper be sold with the existing campsite, to the new owners? Easier to sell the camper and guaranteed income for Park board.
40. Why are the vehicle gates at the campground and the beach not locked after normal hours of operation? (For example, 11 pm to 7am for the campground and dawn to dusk for the beach area)
41. Water tests from the Well and Beach results are not posted for public viewing and/or shared with the campers or beach users. (Both are possible consumers of the well drinking water.)

42. Is there or should there be a **mandatory boil order for water loss pressure events** in the campground.

Our hope is, in the next coming months, during the off-season, that 7 or 8 of these items, be addressed at each of the Park Board's upcoming monthly meetings.

In conclusion, all of the Campers and several of the Bass Lake residents, have agreed that the campground and beach areas have not looked and operated better than it has the past many years. The current Park Board staff have made great strides in improving the campground and beach areas and continue to do so, so **they should be commended on what they have accomplished and what they are planning to do in the future**, to make these areas even better, for everyone to enjoy.

The board thanked Keith and the group for their concerns and have committed to addressing around six concerns in every future meeting. Additionally, the newly-formed committee will also address these at their meeting in the near future.

R. Ritzler motioned, seconded by T. Busch and the financial report was accepted unanimously.

T. Williams gave her report saying we should hear something on the Troyer grant any time now. She will attend the council meeting on Monday to attempt to adjust the budget so that the department may make it through the remaining of the year.

R. Ritzler motioned, seconded by S. Byer to approve claims and paying of routine bills. Passed 5-0.

It was unanimously agreed to adjourn the meeting at 7:29 PM.