

Daily Tidings, Nov. 7th

Questioning parks' priorities

By Susanne Severeid

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The last of the leaves still cling to the trees in Lithia Park in their beautiful hues of red, gold and ochre. Yesterday, I strolled down the paths stopping now and again to take in the magic of this special place in the center of our town. Begun with only eight acres in 1892, Lithia Park now boasts 93 acres and is the “crown jewel” of Ashland. According to Don Robertson, former director of Ashland Parks and Recreation until his retirement in 2014, “Without Lithia Park, Ashland wouldn’t be Ashland. It is literally the heart and soul of our town.”

I encourage those who have a deep and abiding love for this park to pay close attention because there is a connection between the recent changes to Ashland’s senior program and the fate of our precious park. Within days of passing “recommendations” that essentially ripped the heart out of the 43-year-old senior program, the current director of APRC, Michael Black, then went before the City Council asking for \$230,000 to pay a Portland consultant for a plan that will affect Lithia Park for the next 100, yes, 100, years.

Having volunteered and worked part-time for the Senior Center and seen firsthand the mess made of the formerly-robust program, I have little faith in how the current APRC will handle the future of Lithia Park. According to a Tidings article (Aug. 17), Michael Black calls it “a ginormous plan,” citing the historic Perozzi fountain as the first project. Black says, “We want to restore and ensure it perseveres,” yet in the same article he states that it might be moved inside or replaced with something new; that it will be based on what the consultant recommends. How about basing it on what the people of Ashland recommend? (Other areas: the bandshell, “neglected” rose garden, Japanese garden, tennis court, walkway system, century-old log cabin, etc. (<http://www.dailytidings.com/news/20170817/council-oks-230k-lithia-park-study>)).

I don’t shock easily. But the condescension with which the public was treated by the APRC Commissioners at the meetings of Aug. 8 and 9 was offensive. Many seniors, in spite of great physical difficulty, attended the meetings, as

well as nurses, social workers, grant writers, volunteers with Meals on Wheels, and family members. The commissioners' disdain toward the needs of the seniors was, in the words of one senior, "stunning." Commissioner Michael Gardiner (Aug. 8) stated, "... quite frankly, I've already made up my decision. I made my decision up before this meeting." That is, before the public had even had a chance to speak.

Have these men forgotten they are public servants? All of them ran unopposed for their seats. Now they are in charge of a \$9 million yearly budget, making life-altering decisions with enormous consequences for our city. Yet they chastise the public and seniors, as I witnessed, for daring to speak out against their own appalling lack of understanding or respect for a vital social service program and those it serves. The commissioners were all repeatedly invited to come by the center, to have a Food & Friends lunch in the dining room, to talk with elders. I have been told that not one ever did.

It is not about Commissioner Jim Lewis's astonishingly patronizing words, "I know change is scary." It is about our right to question bad decision-making, not based on genuine, transparent public input. We might also question why Michael Black, who doesn't live in Ashland, receives a yearly salary (\$189,000 including benefits) which is higher than the yearly budget of the senior center (\$175,000, which included the salaries of the entire previous experienced staff of five).

These men may have never needed help paying their utility bills, or a subsidized warm meal, or other social safety net services. But there are some inescapable truths in life that will catch up with them: everybody either has aging parents, or they are going to get old themselves. Time catches up with all of us.

And that brings me back to Lithia Park. We have the right to hold Mr. Black and the APRC Commissioners accountable and to challenge them. I beseech you to ask yourself: is this who you want in charge of Lithia Park's vision for the next 100 years?

— *Award-winning author, TV presenter and world traveler Susanne Severeid is an Ashland resident who enjoys making time for the important things in life — including mocha.*

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