



# Summary of Special Public Discussion on Lowell Johnson Park

AIHS Archival Building, August 4, 2022 @ 7pm

## Priorities for this Park

While the recent drowning of a child in our park has not instigated this conversation, it was a deeply tragic event that challenged the park commissioners to once again revisit the very real and ongoing safety issues that have been increasing in frequency. Since 2020, we've been actively trying to address two major concerns:

**Rule Infractions:** Some big, some small, in the last 5 years we have experienced more and more issues with rule compliance in our parks. What makes it different now – compared to a decade ago – is the frequency with which confronting rule-breakers has resulted in hostility and outright refusal to comply or leave. When it occurs, rule-abiding park-goers are subjected to disrespectful individuals who make their park experience unpleasant and residents living near the park must endure disruptive behavior in proximity to their homes.

**Overcrowding:** The park was built when there were 300 people living on the island. Over time, this park was utilized to full capacity. At this point, 40-60% of days we monitored the park attendance, the park was – at peak times and on hot days – overcrowded to a point where safety was a concern. With no permanent way to throttle entry, AIPRD has very little recourse to manage this facet of the park.

## Challenges & Input

Our goal in holding this public discussion was twofold:

**Bring a greater depth of understanding to the public regarding the challenges, limitations, and ongoing efforts to ensure public safety at the park.** To that end, we covered:

**Refresher on the Makeup of AIPRD:** The park district is not affiliated with any county, regional or state organization – it is entirely independent in funding and operation. Five volunteer board members, one paid maintenance vendor with staff, and volunteers are how everything gets done for the parks. With a \$160k annual budget, there is no revenue to take on high-touch park management policies. AIPRD currently has no capacity to hire or manage employees.

**Attendance Stats:** Since our last community survey in 2020, we have two summers of attendance data that confirm the anecdotal evidence we already had: 60-70% of visitors to the park on monitored days did not live / have property on the island and increasingly, this summer 60% of the monitored days exceeded what we would consider an acceptable occupancy.

**Enforcement Challenge:** Though by law, breaking AIPRD rules constitutes a misdemeanor, we struggle to enforce them with no backup from law enforcement to write citations. AIPRD engaged the Pierce County Sheriff's office for almost a year to finally get agreement that they were our enforcement entity. However, they must witness infractions to write citations and PCS works on a "response" mode, not a "patrol" model - that means they do not patrol in search of issues...they respond to calls and resolve issues. Because of the ferry access, they can't respond in a timely fashion to requests for help, and our situations are almost always non-emergency or

non-priority and would not get an immediate response anyway. When we pay for an off-duty officer to patrol the island/park, they cannot write citations because they are not on duty. Adding to the challenge is how understaffed PCS is, further reducing their ability to support their constituency. Dana Stirn, the President of the Riviera Board of Trustees, shared that her organization faces the same challenges and safety concerns for their park hosts and rules enforcement. This is a long-standing, island-wide issue that needs a solution beyond the capacity of one or two organizations. We discussed engaging AICAB and looking for a long-term answer.

**Long-term Restrictions of Park Access to Property Owners:** AIPRD is pursuing legal counsel to gauge whether we could legally restrict park use in this way. However, this comes with its own hurdles: procuring equipment for a system, creating policies and administration, building a staffing capability from scratch, unintended impact of the restriction on neighbors and Riv Parks, as well as no budget with which to enact a permanent solution. With limited budget to run all parks and no established setup for hiring employees, it's unlikely that AIPRD could create and sustain a comprehensive solution – we were never intended to be a “full-service” park district.

**Unsafe and Disruptive Parking on Guthrie:** AIPRD engaged the County in 2020 about installing a no parking zone within 500 yards of the park. We made significant headway and then the administration changed, creating a hard reset on the conversation with no established working relationship with the new staff. We will continue to press the County to address this.

**Expanding the Footprint of the Park:** Though we have a forested buffer that could increase parking, we do not have more room for waterfront expansion to accommodate more visitors using the park. Expanding the size of the parking lot by eliminating wooded sections is not currently being considered, since it's overpopulation of the park itself that is the issue. Additionally, part of our mission is to preserve greenspace which is especially important on a lake that is seeing increased population density.

**Large Groups:** In recent years, and at least 4 times we know of in 2022, camps have brought 25-40 youth to spend the day at the park. Because it's a public park, there has been no communication to AIPRD of these events, and it was during one of these events that this year's drowning occurred. Beyond camps, there has been a trend of large groups coming out to spend all day at the park. Since overcrowding is one of our top two concerns, this is one area of park management that we need to address.

**Gain insight into the public's experience and thoughts on the situation and options.** To that end, in person and via submitted statements, we received feedback on:

- Additional input on the parking issue on Guthrie
- Support for both restricted and open park management
- Caution about the greater and/or unintended impacts of a restricted park policy
- Affirmation that some visitors and youth choose not to visit the park because current conditions make them feel unsafe
- Feasibility of gated access with key cards and day-use pay options, with minimal or no gate attendance required
- Many, many more ideas and discussion to clarify why some common-sense ideas are difficult or unfeasible to implement, especially in any short-term timeline

# Outcome of Park Board Closed Meeting

Public discussion was immensely helpful in anchoring the park commissioners back to the primary goals: address rule enforcement and overcrowding.

**No Park Closure in 2022:** Because of the lack of ability to directly enforce rules, we have spent a lot of time discussing other ways to curb attendance, hoping that would ease the priority issues. In short, we lack the ability to address the problem head-on, and were looking for work-arounds. We know each work-around impacts our community and those who lawfully enjoy the park, and we paused to consider the community voices who asked us to not take drastic measures. To that end, we agreed to keep the park open through the remainder of the 2022 season.

**Effective in 2022 – Restriction of Large Parties:** To more directly address one of our priorities, the board voted to adopt a policy that all parties over 10 individuals would be turned away or asked to leave the park. Despite enforcement challenges, we will be doing our best to share this change widely in press releases, newspaper ads, the County and our own social media channels, erect signage, and encourage park visitors to report incidents to help us enforce the policy. We are confident that this change in policy will meet with compliance from day camps and other official organizations, even if it remains an enforcement challenge for individuals.

**Seeking to implement in 2022 – Engage a Park Host:** The park board voted to adopt a policy to install a park host for the summer season at this park. This will be in effect for the 2023 season, but if we can find someone willing to be a park host and live on the park property through Labor Day Weekend in exchange for performing assigned duties, we would love to get a presence on-site immediately to help us monitor, capture incidents, encourage compliant behavior, and monitor parking capacity. We are actively defining this role, but if you or someone you know is interested, please contact John Larsen for more information ([jlarsen@andersonislandparks.org](mailto:jlarsen@andersonislandparks.org)).

**High-level Options for 2023:** With the large party limitations and park host in place, the board will be researching and documenting a potential gated solution to secure the park, while offering key passes to property owners and day-passes to visitors. This will take time and fundraising. Once we have a sense of the final proposal and cost, we will bring a request for a special levy to the community as a way of funding the project. This would be a one-time property levy that island residents can vote on to fund the project. If that levy fails, we would look at additional funding options. It's likely we would install a gate for the 2023 season, with the plans to implement access technology within 2 years (based on fundraising).

**High-level Options for 2024/2025:** Depending on our engagement with the community, viability of options, effectiveness of the limited groups / park host policies, we foresee the long-term solution – if needed – would be a day-use park fee model, with free access for property owners. There are endless details to work through to assess viability of this model, so please be patient with us as we formulate a workable plan.

## Thank you

Our community engaged in a respectful, earnest way with us about a complex and difficult topic. We appreciate your ongoing support and look forward to continuing a productive discussion.