



CITY OF KENNER

PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 24, 2015

NEW RECREATION MASTER PLAN APPROVED WITH GOAL OF BOOSTING PARTICIPATION

Kenner, LA. – The Kenner City Council has approved a significant change in the way the city’s playgrounds will be operated, authorizing a new master plan that requires the recreation director to study every playground in the city and recommend any changes that could boost participation, including the possibility of leasing some playgrounds to private sports academies.

Strict boundaries that used to determine where kids played youth sports is another of the changes in the new master plan for recreation.

“Having these restrictive boundaries really makes no sense in this day and age,” Chief Administrative Officer Mike Quigley said. “It’s the same with sports academies. They are now the wave of the future and Kenner will be one of the pioneers. This is very progressive,” he said.

Thursday night’s 6-1 vote followed a nearly year-long study of recreation departments throughout the metropolitan area and state conducted by District 5 Councilman Dominick Impastato, Recreation Director Ken Marroccoli and Quigley, a former Jefferson Parish recreation director.

Statistics of youth participation for the past 12 years in Kenner highlight the scope of the problem, Impastato said. From 2003 to 2015, participation in baseball is down 60 percent while girls’ basketball is down 59 percent and girls’ softball is down 55 percent, for example.

There has been no corresponding decline in overall population, so that means Kenner is losing kids to other athletic programs. Impastato said sports academies appear to be responsible for the majority of the drop in participation.

These academies are specialty programs that offer focused training in a particular sport and the opportunity for high-level competition and games throughout the state and region, Impastato said. The academies usually set up a base at a local playground, taking over maintenance and repair duties while still offering access to local kids.

Kenner has academy arrangements for volleyball at Coconut Beach, fast-pitch softball at Westgate Playground and soccer at Sal Plaia Field. But for other sports, including those that are very popular in the city – such as football, basketball and baseball - there are no options now in Kenner.

While some recreation departments in the state are seeking increased tax money or turning over all playgrounds to a private company that is not happening in Kenner.

“We, as an administration and council, are trying to satisfy the needs of our kids without privatizing the entire system and without raising taxes,” Impastato said.

“There is nothing wrong with the status quo when things are working well,” Kenner Mayor Michael Yenni said. “But that clearly is not the case at our playgrounds. The first step was to do the research, and that has been completed. Considering our financial limitations, I believe these changes will allow our playgrounds to thrive for years to come.”

The first step under the new master plan is to closely examine all of the city’s playgrounds to determine if participation is an issue and how it can be addressed. In some cases, that could include adjusting the seasonal sports schedule, Marroccoli said.

For example, if baseball is the overwhelming favorite at one playground and there is little participation in other sports, creating year-round baseball leagues could be answer, Marroccoli said, adding that it is something other thriving programs in the state are doing.

If the decision is made to bring in a sports academy, Quigley said that playground would remain publically owned and operated as a public recreation facility. Recreation officials would continue to ensure all playgrounds remain in compliance with federal, state and local accessibility regulations.

Any leases entered into between the city and a sports academy operator would be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure the operator keeps the playground properly maintained and follows other terms of the lease agreement for public use and accessibility, Quigley said.

Impastato said all of the research indicates the new master plan and the possibility of sports academies is the best way to recapture Kenner kids that are now playing sports elsewhere.

“We have had an issue for a number of years and this is the first time a city council and administration has taken an aggressive approach,” Impastato said. “If it doesn’t work, or if the system needs to be tweaked, we can make the necessary changes.”

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