



June 10, 2008

The Honorable William K. Greenlee
Chairman, Committee on Law and Government
Philadelphia City Council
City Hall Room 580
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19107

Re: Resolution No. 080181 and Ordinance No. 080169

Dear Councilman Greenlee:

On behalf of the Committee of Seventy, I submit this letter into the public record as testimony on Resolution No. 080181 and Ordinance No. 080169. While we had reservations about previous plans to reorganize the City's park and recreation systems, in general, Seventy supports the current proposal.

As a practical matter, it makes sense to fuse parks and recreation. In fact, Philadelphia is the only major city whose park and recreation systems are not consolidated. Merging these entities will improve efficiency by eliminating redundant services, containing costs, and providing a more obvious chain of command to address problems like maintenance and repair. Fragmentation also makes strategic, long-term planning a more costly and complicated process. Quite simply, effective consolidation would eliminate the waste and confusion that plague our fractured system.

The more controversial aspect of this resolution, of course, is the selection of Commission members.¹ With all due respect to the current Fairmount Park Commissioners, giving the Mayor appointment power over the new Commission members (with Council's consent) will improve transparency and accountability, and likely elevate the commitment level of appointees. Under the current system, it is unclear what criteria the Board of Judges use in choosing Fairmount Park

¹ This testimony assumes state law need not be amended to implement the appointment mechanism proposed in Resolution No. 080181. The appointment provision in the current City Charter refers to a state law that gives Court of Common Pleas judges the power to appoint Fairmount Park Commissioners. *See* Philadelphia City Charter § 3-905, 53 P.S. § 16471.

Commissioners, and the Mayor is unable to remove a Commissioner who shirks his or her duty. With the Mayor at the helm, the public knows who is responsible for the Department's success or failure. It should also be noted that Philadelphia is the only major city whose appointment process does not involve the Mayor or City Council.

While Seventy generally supports the changes under consideration today, allow me to suggest some modifications to make this proposal even stronger.

First, adding professional qualifications for the members of the Commission on Parks and Recreation would enhance the new Commission's credibility and expertise as it advises the Department. The current proposal lacks any criteria related to qualifications and background required of the Commissioners. This inevitably raises questions about the reason for the appointment. Selecting proven professionals in the field may not totally eliminate such concerns, but adding criteria provides a stronger assurance that those selected to the Commission are chosen because of their relevant background and qualifications – not their political connections.

Councilmembers Clarke and Reynolds Brown offered a similar resolution in 2006 that included guidelines for the selection of Commission members: they were to have a germane professional background – in watershed management, environmental protection, urban planning, tourism or historical preservation to name a few – and a “demonstrated interest in and knowledge of” the park system. Additionally, membership was to mirror the diversity of our City. (Similar qualifications were also proposed for members of the nominating panel.) These criteria have been removed from the current legislation, but Seventy believes they should be reinserted for Commission members. Requiring professional qualifications would also bring the new Commission on Parks and Recreation in line with, among others, the recently revamped Planning Commission, whose members are drawn from different areas of relevant expertise.

Second, the nominating panel should be eliminated altogether if the qualifications for Commission members are clear, and relevant to the Commission's functions. In other words, an intermediary between the Mayor and potential Commission appointees is unnecessary if the Mayor is appointing a majority of the nominating panel, if each of the Commissioners must possess a particular skill set, and especially if City Council has the authority to accept or reject the Mayor's picks.

If the nominating panel is kept, its composition should be solidified in the Charter. Proposed Charter section 3-1002 designates the original members of the nominating panel, but also permits Council to later change the makeup. Making certain the composition of the panel is best, for it neutralizes any temptation for political favoritism in the future. Council may also want to consider reinserting qualifications for the nominating panel to ensure community input.

The Fairmount Park system is arguably Philadelphia's most valuable asset because it blends our cultural, historical and natural resources. The recent increase to the Park's budget and the consolidation measure under consideration here signify positive steps towards improving the administration of our outdoor space and recreational activities, which will only enhance the quality of life for our City's residents and visitors.

At a time when environmental awareness and crime reduction strategies are so important, it is reassuring that the City's lawmakers are giving priority to our park and recreation systems. If these changes are approved by Council and Philadelphia voters, we expect that the responsibilities stemming from this Charter amendment – including appointing extraordinary leadership to the Commission and to head the consolidated Department, and providing substantial funding – will be taken seriously by the Mayor and this body.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Zach', followed by a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line that extends to the right.

Zachary Stalberg
President and CEO