

Warrant Article 26

TOWN OF BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS
Joint Public Hearing of the Advisory Committee's
Administration and Finance and Capital Subcommittees

A Joint Public Hearing of the Advisory Committee's Administration and Finance and Capital Subcommittees was held via Zoom on Tuesday, April 19, beginning at 5:30 p.m. to review Warrant Article 26.

The meeting was recorded. The recording is available at:

<https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/fZjiwmpTcLTsChDFrJyamRjVOqaiYHwrSuBkW8h3rXyG3YZ3in8p-n3lO-9yRd9l.9HgSxfBumk6p1IeN>

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Participants

Members of the Sub-committees: Carla Benka, Kelly Hardebeck, Carol Levin, Harry Friedman, Harry Bohrs, Stephen Reeders, John Doggett, Neil Gordon

Deborah Brown, petitioner

Leigh Jackson (Director of Recreation)

Nancy O'Connor, Antonia Bellalta, Theresa Mooney
(members of the Parks and Recreation Commission)

Betsy DeWitt, CTOS
Sean Lynn Jones, CTOS
Regina Frawley
Jean Berg, CTOS

Carla Benka, Capital Subcommittee Chair, presided.

The committee members had received, shortly before the meeting, from Ms. Deborah Brown, a mark-up of Article 3.16 of the Town by law which WA26 proposes to amend. Not all participants of the meeting had seen this most recent draft.

Deborah Brown presented the Warrant Article for the petitioners.

Ms. Brown summarized that the objective of WA26 is to encourage participation in Recreation programs by children who may not be able to otherwise afford it. A further objective was to provide for periodic assessment of the Recreation programs.

Ms. Brown noted that the benefits of getting more children involved were numerous and would include: curbing obesity, increasing executive functioning, and developing social skills. A large cohort of children cannot afford to take advantage of the current Recreation programs, in the view of the petitioners. 14% of

Town students receive a free lunch (~1090 students). This number is a proxy for the maximum potential increased demand for an expanded program. Annual costs of the program had not yet been estimated and could be as much as \$2 million (maximum, if all eligible children chose to participate) but were likely to be less.

Following the presentation, the chair opened the floor for questions and comments.

Nancy O'Connor, Vice-chair of the Park and Recreation Commission noted that the Commission was due to meet on April 26 and further discuss WA26 with a view to refining the draft after hearing more from the petitioners. She said that it was not clear whether a bylaw was the best way to achieve the petitioners' objectives which, in general, she agreed with. Antonia Bellalta of the Commission further noted that there were a number of questions as to the demand for the expanded programs, in terms of the number of additional participants, and how the proposed changes to the operation of the Commission would be implemented and paid for.

The Recreation Director, Leigh Jackson, pointed out that the Recreation programs are operated under a cost recovery program in each area of activity. Any excess funds are used to provide financial assistance, as is laid out in the Policy for the program on the Town web site. HUD categories are used to determine how the aid is dispensed. She noted that the Recreation Department partners with, inter alia, Steps to Success and Brookline Mental Health, to apply for grant funding. Betsy DeWitt commented that more aggressive efforts to apply for grants from non-profits could be one way to help fund the expansion of access to Recreation programs.

It was noted that, to expand access to Recreation programs, outreach to potential participants was needed in addition to financial support. In terms of outreach, Ms. Jackson noted that the Department was working with Brookline Housing Authority to put on an event ("Cinco de Mayo") to assess what programs could be of interest in that community. She further noted that recently-implemented new software would help identify poorly-served areas within the Town.

Sean Lynn-Jones noted that other communities adopt a range of methods of paying for expanded access to Recreation programs, including fully free programs. He reviewed the several ways to fund such programs, including a subsidy through Town appropriation, increasing fees on those who can afford to pay and a private scholarship fund, as in Newton. He suggested that a trial program of three years, funded perhaps by ARPA, might help to determine what works and the extent of the demand. The information gained from such trial would help formulate a plan going forward.

It was noted that the WA26 draft includes the requirement for a periodic assessment of Recreation programs. Several meeting participants noted that more information was needed on these proposed reviews and the scope and extent of the financial support needed for expanded access before a view on the proposed changes of WA26 could be properly considered. An answer to these questions, a clearer understanding of the current status of access to programs, and further consultation with the Park and Recreation Commission to determine its position on the proposals was deemed advisable by several Advisory Committee members. There was some doubt as to whether the by law, if enacted, would achieve the purpose intended or whether another approach would be better.

The chairwoman asked whether the petitioners would have the Park and Recreation Commission take this proposed article and look at the policies that have been interwoven into the by law and have the Commission work on those policies and report back to town meeting in November.

Mr. Neil Gordon moved that the subject matter of WA26 be referred to the Park and Recreation Commission for further consideration. Members of both subcommittees voted in favor of the referral motion without dissent, Harry Bohrs recusing himself.

Conclusion: the subject matter of WA26 was referred to the Parks and Rec. Commission for further consideration by a vote of 7-0.