

EFFICIENCY REPORT FOR THE FREEPORT PARK DISTRICT

APPROVED BY THE PARK DISTRICT'S
COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY
ON July 2, 2024 [INSERT DATE]



I. Purpose

The Freeport Park District (“Park District”) formed its Committee on Local Government Efficiency on May 16, 2023, to study efficiencies and report recommendations regarding those efficiencies and increased accountability pursuant to 50 ILCS 70/1, *et seq.* (the “Committee”).

II. Committee Membership

The Committee consisted of the following individuals:

Debbie Schwartz, Chair

Denise McIlwain, Commissioner

Dana Stewart, Commissioner

George Yartzak, Commissioner

Sally Petersen, Commissioner

Cal Wescott, Resident

Ken Collin, Resident

Ron Schneider, Executive Director

Vickie Witt, Secretary

III. Committee Meetings

The Committee met as follows:

Meeting Date	Meeting Time and Place
May 7, 2024	6:30 PM at the Freeport Park District Administration Center, 1122 S. Burchard Ave.
June 4, 2024	6:30 PM at the Freeport Park District Administration Center, 1122 S. Burchard Ave.
July 2, 2024	6:30 PM at the Freeport Park District Administration Center, 1122 S. Burchard Ave.

Minutes of these meetings are available on the Park District's website or upon request at the Park District's administrative office.

IV. General Overview of Governing Statutes, Ordinances, Rules, Procedures, Powers, Jurisdiction

The Park District was established by a referendum initiated and approved by the voters of the Park District in 1911. All Illinois park districts, including the Park District, are governed by the Park District Code, 70 ILCS 1205/1 *et seq.*

Having a separate and distinct taxing body for parks, recreation, and conservation within the local community, which operates apart from general purpose governments, is extremely beneficial to the community for many reasons, as detailed further in this report.

- **Elected, non-partisan, non-compensated board.** The Park District is governed by a board of five commissioners. Commissioners must reside within the boundaries of the park district and are elected at the Consolidated Election in odd-numbered years. Pursuant to state law, commissioners are non-partisan and serve without compensation.
- **Accessible and focused representation.** Having a dedicated board to oversee these essential facilities, programs, and services provides the community with increased access to their elected representatives and allows those elected representatives to remain focused solely on those facilities, programs, and services. This is contrasted with general purpose governments where elected representatives are responsible for broad oversight on a wide range of issues. This special purpose benefit is particularly advantageous when it comes to budget and finance oversight.
- **Increased transparency.** Having a dedicated unit of local government to provide park and recreation services also improves the relationship between the park district and its residents because of the transparency and openness related to the board and park district operations. Having detailed agenda and action items allows taxpayers to be better informed about the inner workings of their local government. When individual units of government are responsible for providing specified services like park districts, transparency is increased because action items and budget procedures are more detailed. Additionally, these items and budgetary decisions are subject to more scrutiny by locally elected officials than is the case with larger, multi-purpose governments with a multitude of departments.
- **Protection of revenues.** Because the Park District is a separate unit of local government, the revenues it generates can only be used for park district purposes. This assurance is contrasted with general purpose governments like cities, villages, and counties that provide a multitude of services such as fire, police, public works, economic development, etc., where revenues that are generated specifically for parks and recreation can be expended on these other services with limited, if any, input from voters.

- **Protection of assets.** Public parks and other real property owned by the park district is held in trust for the residents of the park district, and, subject to very limited exceptions, can only be sold or transferred if residents approve of the sale or transfer by a referendum. This is contrasted with general purpose units of government, which have authority to sell or dispose of property by a vote of the governing board.
- **Providing the Community More with Less.** The Park District does more with much fewer funding options. Unlike other units of local government that receive direct state funding, and income, sales, use, hotel/motel, motor fuel and other numerous taxes, the Park District's only tax revenues come from a modest portion of a resident's overall property tax bill. As part of good governance and implementing best practices in the management of day-to-day operations, the Park District has also adopted the following ordinances, rules, policies, and procedures:
 - Comprehensive Policies and Procedures Manual
 - General Rules & Regulations of the Freeport Park District
 - Employee Handbook
 - Safety Policy Manual

V. List of Shared Services and Partnerships

The Park District works diligently to provide the best possible programs, services, and facilities to our community at the least possible cost. One of the many ways the Park District achieves this goal is by partnering with neighboring park districts, school districts, other units of local government within or near the community, the State, non-profit organizations, and for-profit corporations. Below is a comprehensive list of the current partnerships, agreements, and other relationships that assist the Park District's mission of delivering the best possible services at the least possible cost to our community.

1. Membership in a special recreation association

The Park District is part of the Northlands Association for Special Recreation ("SRA"). Special recreation associations are a form of intergovernmental cooperation among units of local government that are authorized under the Illinois Constitution, the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act, the Park District Code, and the Municipal Code. Their formation is rooted in a fundamental belief and recognition that "Recreation is for Everyone." They are shining examples of local government efficiency.

By partnering together, local communities are able to effectively and efficiently deliver more successful program opportunities to community members who have special needs. Furthermore, by participating in the SRA, the Park District networks with two other local governments to provide many more program opportunities for our community members who have special needs and offers a choice between participating in the SRA's programs or in programs that are provided by the Park District.

The Park District and the SRA also achieve efficiency by utilizing existing facilities that are owned and operated by the SRA's members, including the Park District. Utilizing these existing facilities allows the SRA to deliver services to its member communities at a lower cost.

The SRA also provides the support needed for participants with special needs who choose to register for the Park District programs or inclusive programming. The SRA collects information on the registered participant and determines what supports are needed for that participant to be successful in this inclusive setting or the Park District program. This could include additional training of the supervisory staff, additional support staff, the use of adaptive equipment, behavior management, and/or other measures that will assist in the successful participation of this individual in the Park District program. Although success may not look the same for everyone, the SRA works with the Park District's staff to ensure the best possible results for all the participants in the program. The Park District's cost of providing these services would be much greater without its participation and partnership in the SRA.

The Park District is very proud of the ongoing collaboration with the SRA. By working cooperatively with other local governments, not only are we better able to collectively

serve all citizens within our communities, including persons with disabilities, but we are able to do so in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

2. Other intergovernmental agreements with other park districts, forest preserve districts, conservation districts, or municipal recreation agencies

- *Illinois Parks Association Risk Services (IPARKS)*
- *Illinois Public Risk Fund (IPRF)*

3. Intergovernmental agreements with other units of local government

- *School/Park Agreement with Freeport School District*
- *City of Freeport (1993 & 2011 IGA's)*
- *Jane Addams Trail Commission*
- *Pecatonica Prairie Trail Commission*

4. Intergovernmental agreements with the State of Illinois

- *Numerous grant agreements with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources*

5. Partnerships or agreements with athletic or similar affiliate organizations that operate sports or other leagues

- *Stephenson County Historical Society Agreement*
- *Field Use Agreement with Freeport Little League*
- *Disc Golf Club Agreement*
- *Planetary Studies Use Agreement*
- *Agreement with Cedarville Snow Travelers*
- *Freeport Concert Band Agreement*

6. Partnerships or other interrelationships with non-profits

- *Lease Agreement with Save the Tabernacle Inc.*
- *Lease Agreement with Little Cubs Field NFP*
- *Concession Stand License Agreement with Freeport Phantoms*

- *Partner level member of the Greater Freeport Partnership*

7. Partnerships with for profit organizations

- *Deacon Davis Courts License Agreement with Nicor Gas*
- *Krape Park Concession Stand License Agreement*

VI. Other Examples of Efficient Operations

Use of volunteers. One way in which the Park District reduces the burden on taxpayers is through the use of volunteers.

Youth employment. The Park District is a major employer of youth in the community. Not only is this an efficient way to deliver services, but youth employment serves as a valuable training tool for the future workforce.

Joint purchasing (if not listed above). The Park District participates in joint purchasing cooperatives pursuant to the Governmental Joint Purchasing Act (30 ILCS 525/0.01 *et seq.*) thereby saving taxpayer dollars through economies of scale.

Freeport Parks Foundation. The Foundation supports the Park District in achieving its goals by encouraging philanthropy and volunteer services. The Foundation works with the Park District to identify projects where there is a financial shortfall and develops strategies for financial assistance.

Collaboration with other park districts on best practices. Because park districts are not in competition with one another, they are more willing than the private sector to share best practices. These best practices help to avoid unnecessary costs and deliver services more effectively and efficiently.

Reliance on Non-Tax Revenue. Unlike most local governments that rely on a wide range of sales, use, and income taxes, the Park District is not permitted to assess these types of taxes. Additionally, although the Park District is an economic engine for the community and generates much revenue for the state and our community in the form of hotel/motel, sales, and motor fuel taxes, our Park District does not receive any of these revenues. Also, unlike Illinois cities, villages, counties, and school districts that received billions of dollars in direct financial assistance from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), our Park District did not receive any such direct federal aid. Our Park District also does not receive state funding under the Local Government Distributive Fund (LGDF) or General State Aid (GSA) that these same cities, villages, counties, and school districts receive through the State budget.

Instead, the Park District provides all of the programs, facilities, and services to the community with a very modest amount of property taxes and from **non-tax sources** such as memberships, program registrations, and other user fees as well as private donations and grants.

VII. Transparency to the Community

The following information about the Park District may be obtained by citizens in the location listed.

Document	Location(s) Available <small>(website, administrative offices, county clerk, state website, etc.)</small>
• Annual tax levy	www.freeportparkdistrict.org
• Annual budget and appropriation ordinance	www.freeportparkdistrict.org
• Board Agenda and minutes	www.freeportparkdistrict.org
• Board Meeting Recordings	www.freeportparkdistrict.org
• Annual audit	www.freeportparkdistrict.org
• Comprehensive Master Plan	www.freeportparkdistrict.org
• Procurement Opportunities	www.freeportparkdistrict.org
• Job Opportunities	www.freeportparkdistrict.org
• Annual Report	www.freeportparkdistrict.org
• Comptroller's annual finance report	Administration Center
• ADA transition plan	Administration Center

The Park District offers residents many opportunities to provide feedback. These include:

- The board of commissioners meets on the third Tuesday of each month. Residents may provide public comment at every meeting.
- The Park District's annual Budget and Appropriation Ordinance is available in tentative form at least 30 days prior to its adoption at an open meeting of the Park District board. Additionally, at least one public hearing is held prior to final action, and notice of the hearing is published in the newspaper at least one week prior to the hearing.
- The Park District's annual property tax levy is approved at an open meeting of the Park District board in accordance with the Open Meetings Act. The Park District follows all public notice and hearing requirements under the Truth in Taxation Law prior to the adoption of this annual tax levy. The Park District's

annual levy is also subject to the limitations of the Property Tax Extension Limitation Law.

- Residents may contact or request information from the Park District by phone at 815-235-6114 or email at contact@freeportparkdistrict.org.
- The Park District conducted a recreation needs assessment in 2022 that was a statistically valid survey. The survey resulted in a report of the community's priorities for recreation, parks and facility needs.
- Public Hearings and public input sessions are offered when required by law or when the Board of Commissioners deems it necessary.
- Program and facility evaluation forms.
- Social media.

VII. District Awards and Recognition

The District's achievements have been recognized in numerous ways.

- *Recognized as a Joint Distinguished Accredited Agency*
- *Winner of IPRA's Outstanding Program Award in 2006, 2008 & 2024*
- *Staff Certifications, including but not limited to, Certified Parks & Recreation Professional, Certified Parks & Recreation Executive, Master Gardener, Certified Pool Operator, Certified Arborist, and others.*

VIII. Benefits and Services

The Park District serves the entire community from the youngest child to the oldest adult and all ages in between. It does so in a variety of ways.

1. Facilities

The Freeport Park District owns and operates a variety of recreation facilities including a 36-hole golf course, aquatic center, baseball/softball complex, 18-hole miniature golf course, pickleball courts, tennis courts, basketball courts, 20-horse carousel, museum, community centers, amphitheater, boat rentals, and several miles of multi-use trails.

2. Programs

The Freeport Park District offers a variety of programs to meet the everchanging needs and interests of its residents. The annual program guide, normally published annually in March, provides a listing of the District's programs and services. This publication can be viewed on the Park District's website and is also available at District facilities.

3. Other Benefits

While the Park District is a special purpose district, its impact to the community is multi-faceted and far reaching. For example, the Park District's parks, recreational programming, and other opportunities improve the community's overall physical and mental health and wellness, thereby reducing health care costs. Before and after school and summer programs offer safe, convenient, and affordable childcare options for working families during critical times when school is not in session. These opportunities also help reduce juvenile crime. The Park District's open space and trees help improve air and water quality and mitigate flooding.

IX. Recommendations for Increased Accountability and Efficiency

1. Intergovernmental Fees and Charges

One opportunity for efficiency would be the elimination of fees and charges assessed by other units of government. By way of example, below are amounts that other units of local government charge the Park District even though the Park District's taxpayers are also taxpayers of these other units of local government. Such fees and charges, and the bureaucracy that accompanies them, inhibit the park district's ability to deliver programs, facilities, and services at the least possible cost. These fees include, but are not limited to, building permits, demolition permits, county food service certificates, state and local liquor license, pool permits, amusement ride license, boat rental licenses, and city water fees.

Other units of local government should recognize that intergovernmental fees often lead to inefficiency in the expenditure of taxpayer dollars through extra bureaucracy and administrative costs. In many cases, the unit of government assessing the fee ultimately benefits from the project or event, meaning it can recoup its costs through the extra sales tax or other revenue that will be generated. Where such fees are absolutely necessary, general purpose units of government should offset the fee by crediting the park district for all benefits they will receive from a project, event, or property. For example, open space that is protected and maintained by the Park District helps mitigate stormwater management costs, so assessing stormwater management fees on the Park District not only leads to inefficiency, but it is also shortsighted.

Governmental units should be discouraged or prohibited from charging more than their out-of-pocket costs associated with the activities covered by a fee that is assessed to another unit of local government with the same taxpayers. Put another way, one unit of local government should not profit by taxing another. Eliminating local permit fees is a way to reduce administrative costs without impacting overall public revenue. Local government best serves the people when it cooperates and works together. Some communities recognize this and do not charge fees to other units. All communities should be encouraged to follow that model to receive the best results for local taxpayers and to promote governmental efficiency.

2. Inefficiency of Other Governments

The Park District has also been negatively impacted by the inefficiency of other units of local government.

3. Unfunded Mandates

Unfunded state mandates are another cost driver. While the Park District recognizes that there are benefits to some of these mandates, modifications could help alleviate some of the burden to the park district.

a) Non-resident FOIA Requests. Often the individuals/businesses submitting the FOIA requests are from outside of the park district boundaries, and they appear to be serving a specific agenda, rather than assuring better local government.

Under current law, resident taxpayers end up footing the bill for these non-resident or commercial requests. In order to help alleviate the burden for these non-resident requests the law could be amended to: (1) add a requirement that non-residents identify/explain the purpose of the request for information; (2) add a time limit on how far back a non-resident can request information; (3) staff time and costs could be included in the amount that is reimbursable for non-resident and commercial requests; (4) move back the deadline for non-resident requests 10 business days so that the park district does not have to delay services to its residents in order to comply with a non-resident request.

Sunshine laws are supposed to protect taxpayers by allowing them to shed light on any issue that is not exempt from FOIA. However, local government can be burdened by having to drop everything to rearrange priorities to meet FOIA deadlines, particularly if it has limited resources. Since local residents ultimately bear the expense of complying with FOIA, treating resident and non-resident requests differently would be justified.

b) Criminal Background Checks. All park districts are statutorily required to conduct criminal background checks on all employees pursuant to Section 8-23 of the Park District Code. The background checks must be done through the Illinois State Police (ISP). The Park District does not recommend eliminating this mandate because it is necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of children and other park district patrons. However, the State should explore ways in which it could improve the current system and make it less costly for park districts to comply with the law.

The mandate also raises the fundamental question as to why one layer of government is forced to charge its taxpayers to comply with a State mandate when the State made the determination to impose the mandate. Put another way, if the State has determined that criminal background checks are necessary for public safety, the State should assist with compliance.

The Park District recommends studying whether there can be a more efficient background check process implemented through the ISP to reduce the time and expense it takes for background checks. Another suggestion is for ISP to waive the fee for checks on minors or waive all fees for name checks. If there is a "hit" from a name check, the fee could be charged for the more costly fingerprint check. Since it is a state mandate, perhaps the fee structure for park districts should also be reviewed to determine whether the fee being charged exceeds the actual cost of doing the check and, if so, perhaps the ISP could consider reducing its cost to local governments.

c) Prevailing Wage. One way to reduce burden on local government staff is to limit the prevailing wage requirement to larger capital contracts. This would free up tracking of the paperwork on small repairs and projects. One reason for creating a threshold requirement is the cost of the administrative burden relative to the cost of the actual project. For example, eliminating prevailing wage on smaller projects, e.g., those less than \$50,000, will result in more local bids and decrease the overall cost for these smaller public works projects.

d) Newspaper Publication. The newspaper is no longer the most effective way to provide notice. Websites are cheaper and reach more people. Permitting the park district to post the information on its website in lieu of newspaper publications would reduce costs.


4. Opportunities for Increased Transparency

As illustrated above, the Park District is very transparent in its operations. However, the Park District should continue to strive to be transparent and always look at better ways to keep the public informed about its business.

5. Opportunities for Other Intergovernmental Agreements

Although the Park District has an impressive amount of intergovernmental relationships, it should continue to seek ways to work with other governmental agencies and memorialize those agreements in writing.

Dated: July 2 2024 [INSERT DATE FINAL REPORT APPROVED BY EFFICIENCY COMMITTEE]

Signed:  [CHAIR'S SIGNATURE]