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tourism and community needs coexist?



Sarah Honosky

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Fearing the needs of residents in one of Asheville's oldest historically Black neighborhoods are being overlooked in favor of tourists, City Council member Antanette Mosley is pushing to fund a long-desired and contentious track at Memorial Stadium.

As the city grappled with the allocation of \$17.9 million in federal COVID-19 funds at a Feb. 1 work session, Mosley asked that ARPA funds be considered for the project, "keeping our promises made to a community that had already been ravaged by urban renewal."

At the center of East End/Valley Street's story is the city-owned Memorial Stadium, built in 1925, a park that sits behind McCormick Field and has spent much of the last three decades in disrepair.

Mosley grew up in East End, daughter of the late Rev. Charles Mosley, and fourth generation of her family in the neighborhood. She remembers the park as a central place for Black children in the community to play, especially in the summer.

Though a public track has long been supported by the field's neighbors, she fears "the usage switched," and that a local soccer club's dreams for a competitive-sized field have directed focus away from neighborhood needs.

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Mosley said she first learned of the issue before she was appointed to council in 2020, early in the pandemic.

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Mosley said the community is convinced that the promise for a track will never be fulfilled, and it's her goal to help make it happen.

“It isn’t just literally about the track. It’s about a broader, long-standing tendency to reach out and say, ‘We’re going to work with the most disaffected members of our community.’ Only to, at the last minute, make a decision that benefits another group,” Mosley said.

“And the folks are going to be told, ‘We’ll get to you at some point. We’ll get to you.’ And when, you know, these folks have been waiting over three decades. This is what they said they want, this is what they said they need, and this is what they were promised.”

Seeking COVID-19 relief funding

Mosley said the conversation has recently reignited, and she asked City Manager Debra Campbell if a track would be eligible for ARPA funding.

Campbell responded in an email to Mosley and council Feb. 1 that staff had met the day before to discuss input received from council on the project.

As a result, Campbell said staff will develop three potential concepts for the track, including two designed around the field.

Definitive cost estimates for each design, along with pros and cons, will also be developed, she said.

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City spokesperson Kim Miller said they don’t have a set time for the completion of these concepts, and the costs and funding sources have not been identified.

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"Really, this is another form of gentrification. When it was dilapidated, we didn't want anything to do with it. But now that we're making improvements, we now find ourselves with a David and Goliath situation," Mosley said.

"As a daughter of East End, I'm inclined in this instance to lean into people over profit."

'That plan got sidetracked'

Former Asheville Parks and Recreation Director Roderick Simmons called Memorial Stadium the only flat field in the city for public use, in high demand and disrepair for much of its life.

Simmons left his post in summer 2021 after serving with the city for 15 years.

At the heart of downtown Asheville, the 100-year-old facility was home to Asheville High School football and a number of recreation teams, like Asheville Youth League, and plans for a multipurpose track at the stadium would fill a gap in parks and recreation offerings, Simmons said.

Improvements were incorporated into the 2009 Parks and Recreation Master Plan, but Simmons said the original plans drawn up in 2012, which included a public track at the behest of the East End community, never came to fruition.

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When plans were initially created, there wasn't funding. But when the city got the go-ahead for \$17 million of parks and recreation bond funds after a November 2016 referendum vote, he said everybody started to have ideas.

"That plan got sidetracked," Simmons said. "Typical Asheville, it became not about programming and operations, it became political."

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Located on the east end of downtown, it was easily accessible and could draw in people from all over.

“It moved away from a public park for the neighborhood and our programming, to more of a regional tourist destination supporting professional soccer and hosting international soccer events,” Simmons said. “It was a grander scale, but our budget from the bond wasn’t enough to support that.”

Sports: Dust bowl to frenzied fans, Asheville City Soccer Club heralds new era

Renee White, president of the East End/Valley Street Neighborhood Association, said the neighborhood has been lobbying to build a track for close to a decade.

It was her understanding that bond money was always supposed to be dedicated to this project, along with a parking plan for the stadium that would lessen strain on the surrounding neighborhood and improvements to Mountainside Park.

"Almost anything that we asked for we didn't get, and we haven't gotten," White said.

With the neighborhood, sports clubs, tourism boards and city each questioning how bond funds should best be used, Simmons said that is where the project stalled.

It became a question of how the disparate projects could coexist, as the track planned for the field would interfere with competitive field dimensions or bleacher expansion.

"A quagmire," Simmons said. "It became public community programming versus special events, tourism development. ... It's a political, no pun intended, football. Do you move it down the field or stop it here?"

'Room for improvements': Buncombe more a 'place to visit' than a 'place to live' says county's 1st community survey

The only bond-funded project to move forward for the stadium was a \$900,000 turf replacement that kicked off in August 2021 and wrapped in January.

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Parks and Rec: New Asheville Parks and Recreation director: City needs deliberate focus on equity

In a June 11 email thread between Simmons, then still director of parks and recreation, councilmembers and city staff, Mosley asked what happened to plans for the track. This thread came on the tail end of conversations about striping for the field, ahead of its bond-funded turf and drainage replacement project.

Simmons responded that Asheville City Soccer Club and the Sports Commission were in opposition to installation of a public track as well as the initial project's seating plan, which would reduce its capacity.

"The size field requested by the Soccer club for semi-professional play and the BCSC for tournament play did not allow for the inclusion of a community running track that was

originally depicted in the stadium master plan," Simmons wrote.

The public track would reduce the field size by 6 yards, still meeting FIFA soccer regulations, but limiting its ability to host national and international professional soccer matches.

The small field size would impact their ability to move up in the professional soccer division, he said.

Asheville Soccer Club: Answer Man: Professional soccer in Asheville? Upgrade for Memorial Stadium?

Ryan Kelley, an owner of the Asheville Soccer Club, said he is aware plans for a track have been around for a while, and that the initial designs put forward several years ago for an eight-lane competition track would reduce the size of the field and seating.

However, he said the club supports a walking track that would accommodate the field size and seating, and is supportive of any plan that allows them to coexist in the space.

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For sure, we want to be neighbors. That's our goal," Kelley said. "And we realize that we're just one piece of a larger equation there and we want it to work for everyone."

A disheartened neighborhood

On soccer game days, White, with the neighborhood association, said people descend on the neighborhood by the hundreds. Cars clog residential streets, beer cans are left strewn in the grass and limited parking means torn turf and muddy pits in parks and yards.

The movement of the stadium toward special events and tourism has "impacted us greatly," she said, and despite a number of conversations between the city and soccer team, all parties seem to want different things.

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Though White has no hard objections to the club itself, she said if they come into her neighborhood, she wants her community to be respected.

Ultimately, she doesn't feel heard by the city. She is disheartened, but refuses to stop her fight.

She said they aren't asking for a 10-lane track — just a little walking track that people can enjoy, and right now "things are not looking good."

"How are you going to sit down and talk about reparations, when you are continuing to do harm in our Black neighborhoods and think that it's OK?" White said. "If you're trying to help us, how are you going to help us and harm us at the same time?"

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Along with design, staff will evaluate costs as well pros and cons of each concept, Miller wrote. City staff will then meet with the surrounding neighborhoods to discuss the concepts, for further input."

What comes next?

In response to an email from Mosley, just before the topic was raised at the Feb. 1 work session, Campbell indicated in her email that the project could potentially be funded with ARPA funds under the category of city infrastructure.

She said Jade Dundas, capital projects director, gave a cost estimate of around \$2 million for the track around the field, but the city does not yet have detailed estimates and it was only "a guess."

Meanwhile, Kelley said with turf improvements finished, the club hopes to return to the field this summer.

Council member Sage Turner, council liaison for the Sports Commission, said Feb. 2 that the city is continuing outreach and due diligence on potential upgrades and amenities at Memorial Stadium and Mountainside Park, including bathrooms, lighting, accessibility, turf size, track space and more.

"My hope is to find a way to create the vision the neighborhood put forth in earlier years, including a walking track, in a way that does not displace field users," she said. "In the coming months, we'll produce some renderings of the possibilities and seek cost estimates and additional input."

Vice Mayor Sheneika Smith is in strong support of those advocating for the track, and said she believes the organizations can all coexist as long as there is regard for the "legacy users" of the field who have been "historically displaced."

Like Mosley, Smith, who grew up in Southside, said she frequented the park growing up, and said if the city turns its focus to the original request, it will be a satisfying effort.

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Mosley called the Feb. 1 conversation a start in remedying a situation that was allowed to head in the wrong direction.

"I think we will be able to rectify the situation, there is certainly enough ARPA funding to do just that," Mosley said. "My hope is that, at some point, conversations can be had with the Sports Commission. I'm not sure if they are truly aware of the history. If they are aware of the history, their position might change."

Sarah Honosky is the city government reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA TODAY Network. News Tips? Email shonosky@citizentimes.com or message on Twitter at @slhonosky.