

# Memorial Stadium fumble: 'We need to do better,' Asheville city manager says



[Sarah Honosky](#)

Asheville Citizen Times

ASHEVILLE - As frustrations mount, one of Asheville's oldest historically Black neighborhoods is demanding answers from the city surrounding millions in bond funds, money they had believed would be dedicated to a long-desired community track.

Residents voiced disappointment at a virtual East End/Valley Street neighborhood meeting on March 10, in which all City Council members and City Manager Debra Campbell were invited and, in an unusual move, nearly all attended, with staff offering options for a way forward.

"We need to do better," Campbell said. She anticipated more public engagement in the future, and said the city would revise its input process "such that it's more iterative," requiring greater feedback from the community.



Though City Council and staff seemed to voice support for the project, and offered sympathies about the convoluted process, Renee White isn't sure if she can trust that anything will change.

It's like Groundhog Day for White, president of the East End/Valley Street Neighborhood Association who said she is being forced to watch history repeat itself as neighborhood needs are overlooked in favor of stakeholders outside the community.

"We are literally, as a neighborhood, back to square one with Memorial Stadium," White said. "We've been through this process before."

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At the center of the conflict is the city-owned Memorial Stadium, built in 1925, a park that sits behind McCormick Field, where the Asheville Tourists minor league baseball team plays, and has spent much of the last three decades in disrepair.

For generations, it served the area's Black community, and was home to local recreation teams and high school leagues.

"That was our bright and shining field over here in this little part of the mountain," said Kim Collins, another East End resident. "There's history there. That track is core and fundamental to the Black community in East End."

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All but one member of City Council — Vice Mayor Sheneika Smith — were in attendance at the virtual meeting. Among them was Antanette Mosley, a native of East End, who has been [vocal in her support for a track](#).

The staff presentation followed a \$1.2 million investment of bond funds in the field — replacing its artificial turf, improving drainage and creating new stormwater infrastructure.

The project wrapped earlier this year.

According to White, these changes were made without giving the neighborhood notice, and instead catered to the desires of the newly-formed semipro Asheville City Soccer Club, which made the field home in 2017.

White said this decision was a slap in the face to a longstanding community request for a new track and went back on numerous discussions and public input meetings held over the last several years.

"We should have all been at the table the whole process, and we were not," White said.

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Other neighborhood members said they were "blindsided" by the reversal, and said after a number of conversations about the future of the stadium, all possibilities seemed to disappear.

Pete Wall, parks focus area manager with the city, said beginning in August 2019 there was a scope of work presented that did not include a track but included maintenance work. He said the project took public input and information was shared along the way.

## City considers options

If a six-lane competitive track were to be built, meeting the demands of the East End neighborhood, the newly-installed turf and stormwater infrastructure would be impacted.

The project would be more costly, said Asheville Parks and Recreation Director D. Tyrell McGirt, and the \$1 million bond funds remaining would not be enough to cover it.

If constructed, it would also reduce the turf field by about 5 yards, still meeting FIFA soccer regulations, but limiting the soccer team's ability to host national and international professional matches.

The six-lane track was among the options presented to the neighborhood on March 10, with an estimated cost of \$2.5 million that McGirt said was subject to change.

Two other options were also floated: a 0.2-mile loop walking track through Mountainside Park beside the field, and a 0.26-mile loop that would meander through the park and around the field without disrupting existing turf.

The estimated costs for these options were \$150,000 and \$200,000, respectively.

McGirt also presented other planned projects for the park, including improvements to its playground, restroom renovations and the conversion of the concession stand to equipment storage.

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Those improvements and the walking trails could be funded by the remaining bond funds, but the six-lane track creates greater complications.

He said Parks and Recreation planned to share the options with other user groups, as well, like football and rugby leagues, and the soccer club.

"We want to operate in a way that is making sure that we are keeping the citizens that live in the community, and who are impacted the most ... into consideration as we move forward, making decisions on what to do," McGirt said.

He said a new track would allow the department to pursue a community running program and host track and field events, and by eliminating some seating, would better align available capacity to current parking space.

Following the presentation, White said the neighborhood is asking for a six-lane track, a walking path through Mountainside Park, improvements to the park and a parking plan — which she said the neighborhood has requested many times before, to no avail.

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"I don't know how the city can continue to talk about reparations when you're still causing harm in our Black communities, in our Black neighborhoods. The two do not mix, the two do not go together," White said.

Campbell said the city was "not trying to repeat" what happened in 2019, when the city moved forward with its maintenance project that included the re-turfing of the field.

"It is a tough lesson learned," she said. "But there will be some improvements, definitely, based on this process. Going forward, I hope that we can be a better partner with communities, not just East End, but communities throughout the city of Asheville on capital projects."

## **Mosley pushes for resolution of support**

Collins demanded answers from council and vocal support for the six-lane track moving forward.

"We're just asking for restoration of what was taken," she said. Calling the prior decision an attempt to "colonize and gentrify," she said it's all too easy for outsiders to come into Black neighborhoods and reap the benefits of the system.

"We're taking a stand and saying enough is enough."

Mosley reiterated her enduring support for the project, and said she has prepared a resolution to initiate the procurement process necessary to undertake the construction of a six-lane track.

"I wish the community had been listened to years ago, and we wouldn't be in this situation," she said.

Mosley called for the estimated \$2.5 million project to be funded with federal dollars, utilizing a portion of the \$17.9 million in American Rescue Plan Act money currently being considered by the city.

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She is working to get the resolution on the agenda of an upcoming meeting.

According to City Attorney Brad Branham, if a single member of council makes such a request, it is left to the discretion of the mayor and city manager.

However, if three council members make a joint request for the item's inclusion, then the mayor must either direct the item to be placed on the next agenda or sent first to one of the council committees for consideration.

At the March 10 meeting, council member Sandra Kilgore said she would vote for a six-lane track, and Mayor Esther Manheimer said she would support the community wishes.

Council member Sage Turner said if everyone can coexist, "wonderful."

"In the spirit of really, what I've heard tonight, there's been a lack of investment, clarity and planning around this park," Turner said. "And (with) this continued message of reparations we're beginning to start, is it not possible to do all of it?"

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