

By Sarah Cavacini scavacini@palatkadailynews.com August 12, 2020 Publication: Palatka Daily News (FL) Page: A1 Word Count: 521

Project P.L.A.Y. at John Theobald Sports Complex in Palatka opens today after the Putnam County Board of Commissioners green-lighted the park Tuesday in a 4-1 vote.

A discussion on opening the park came Monday during the county's Recreation Advisory Board meeting, but votes to either open the park or keep it closed resulted in a 3-3 tie.

The board decided to open Project P.L.A.Y. after a 10 a.m. grand opening ceremony today. Commissioner Bill Pickens voted against the opening because he wanted to wait until after Labor Day.

"It's going to be self-discipline as far as what people do when they get there," Pickens said. "That was one of the concerns was the amount of people that possibly could be at this park at one time when it opens up."

Project P.L.A.Y. was completed earlier this year but not opened because of the coronavirus pandemic. Other county parks have been open for a while, but the board was cautious when debating Project P.L.A.Y.'s reopening because of its splash pad water feature.

The new park was part of a partnership with the Rotary Club of Palatka, which donated \$100,000 toward the playground's renovation as part of the club's 100th anniversary celebration.

"We thought it was important to have a very nice playground as people into the county that they could kind of see as a showpiece," former Rotary President Joe Boatwright said. "We're very excited it's opening."

Putnam County Parks and Recreation Director Kevin Stevens said he leaned toward opening the parks because he didn't want to have a grand opening of Project P.L.A.Y., only to leave it closed after the ceremony.

"We don't seem to be having issues at other playgrounds," Stevens said. "We know this (playground) will be the main draw. It's brand new. ... I can support opening the playground and letting parents take that responsibility."

Renovations were made to improve the quality of the previously wooden park, save money on repairs toward the old park and create a more accessible playground with wheelchair ramps, a swing for people with disabilities and age group-specific areas in the playground.

The splash pad costs \$62,671 and the playground costs \$292,452.12. The money will come from the Board of County Commissioners' Port Authority funds in addition to the Rotary Club of Palatka's donation.

Handwashing stations and signs reminding parents of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines will be positioned around the playground.

“I really just think we need to open this thing up,” Commissioner Jeff Rawls said. “The public’s going to do what the public’s going to do.”

In other board news, commissioners unanimously approved all items on Tuesday’s agenda. These included a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice for \$12,992 to the Putnam County Sheriff’s Office.

The money will be used to purchase equipment and uniforms for the crime scene investigation unit.

“Acquiring this grant will allow the Putnam County Sheriff’s Office Crime Scene Unit to more efficiently process crime scenes and ultimately enhance public safety,” county documents stated.

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