

Moving Field Maintenance from Park and Rec to Public Works



Recently the Board of Finance has initiated discussion of changing responsibility for maintenance of town-owned fields and grounds. People have asked why we are pursuing this issue. The Board of Finance (BOF) has long sought to work with all town departments to find ways to either provide enhanced services at little or no additional cost or to provide the same level of services at a lower cost.

Examples of this approach encouraged by the BOF but managed by individual departments are the current pilot program to join the Westport/Weston Health District to gain access to enhanced service at no increase in cost and the exploration of joining with Fairfield, Westport and Sacred Heart University to develop a joint emergency services dispatch center to reduce cost while not affecting service. A different type of project already completed by Public Works (DPW) involved the acquisition of a bucket truck primarily for dealing with dead or diseased trees on town property but also available for uses like changing lights in the Staples parking lot. We used to rent a bucket truck for several weeks every year and try to get all the needed work done in that time. When we had an opportunity to take the same dollar amount we were budgeting annually and use it for a three-year lease/purchase agreement, we gained year-round use of the truck and, beginning in year four, eliminated the expense.

In keeping with this practice, we looked at our current situation where we have two year-round employees plus additional seasonal help to maintain the athletic fields and other properties owned by the town. These people are under the direction of Park and Recreation. With a department this size and only two regular staff it is not realistic to assume they will have expertise in areas that they only occasionally encounter. We can also only justify an array of equipment to handle the normal work of the department. It is also clear that there is a seasonality to the workload with spring and fall sports seasons being heaviest and winter the lightest. We then looked at DPW. They have a larger staff that allows them to have a highly qualified welder to repair broken equipment, a very capable diesel mechanic, skilled tree workers and a broader array of equipment.

Historically, the two departments have assisted each other and other departments, but coordinating schedules is difficult. A logical approach then would be to look at consolidating the two workforces by moving the Park and Rec maintenance staff and their responsibilities to DPW. This would be similar to how we moved the labor portion of maintenance and repair at the schools to DPW a few years ago. By making this change we would gain greater flexibility, we would expect more productive use of staff in slower months and give Park and Rec better access to specialized equipment that is now available in DPW without going to outside contractors or equipment rental.

Concerns have been expressed about whether DPW would provide the same level of service for field maintenance as we have seen in the past. Based on the track record of DPW providing Easton with the best-maintained roads in the area (without borrowing for road work like neighboring towns), their maintenance of a variety of town facilities, and their promptness in the winter of getting our roads plowed compared to other towns, I have no doubt that the level of service currently enjoyed by sports teams would not be diminished while allowing us to better use our personnel assets.