

Leslie Morris statement to Ann Arbor City Council, June 7,2010

Ann Arbor likes parks. Since 1966, every single park ballot issue has passed. That's more than 40 years.

In the late 1980's, I was part of a group that put a park acquisition millage on the ballot by petition. To my knowledge, that is the only time in Ann Arbor's history that taxes were raised as the result of a citizen petition. It was an interesting experience. I collected 300 signatures. The most interesting part for me was that only two people I approached for signatures declined to sign. One said he thought we had other priorities. The other said taxes were too high already. The other 300 signed, and presumably voted for this tax increase. The champion petitioner in our group, George Sexton (may his memory be for a blessing) collected 1000 signatures. Of course, the issue passed.

Ann Arbor citizens have demonstrated their love for parks in other ways. Many have put in countless hours of volunteer labor in parks. Some have given gifts to the parks. Memorial park benches all over the park system testify to someone's love of a particular park.

Parks are an Ann Arbor value.

During the 40 years I have lived here, and supported Ann Arbor's parks, many city administrators, mayors and city councils have come and gone. Some have understood this Ann Arbor value. But others have found it hard to understand.

A few years ago some park staffers suggested that selling part of Huron Hills Park should be investigated. Of course, angry citizens denounced the plan. The result was a charter amendment to the effect that any sale of park land would require a public vote. We citizens are grateful to you, Mayor and Council, for proposing this charter amendment. We are grateful for your pledges to take selling park land off the table. But the probing for weakness continues. Leases? Private operations in parks? A private driving range in Huron Hills?

We often hear citizens admonished for protesting private development projects. After all, the property owner has rights! With parks, we are the property owners.

If you decide to request proposals for private use of part of Huron Hills Park, you are certain to see many citizens protesting your action. You are not very likely to see an equivalent parade of citizens requesting a private driving range in Huron Hills Park. Don't our wishes count here?

We lovers and supporters of parks think our support is a valuable city resource. It has helped to make Ann Arbor a desirable place to live. We recognize your financial difficulties. If at some point you decide to put a tax issue on the ballot to alleviate these financial difficulties, we want to be able to support you. But we need your support as well.

We don't want you to sell parks.

We don't want you to lease parks.

We don't want you to use parks as opportunities for somebody's private business development.