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Park improvements are sought

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More than 45 residents met with city and county officials Monday night to brainstorm ideas about how to revitalize East Bradenton Park.

Residents complained that the park off 13th Avenue East is run-down and needs new equipment, more recreational programming and extra policing. "The equipment that's there has got to go to the dumpster," said **Cynthia Newell**, director of Neighborhood Leadership Initiative Inc., which staged the forum.

"Every community deserves to have a place where they can come as a family and participate in recreational activities . . . and not have to worry about criminal activity or the perception of criminal activity."

Several residents called for lighting at the basketball courts and the baseball diamond, saying lights will make the park safer. A safer park, they said, will attract more young people and families.

Danny Hopkins, director of the Manatee County Parks and Recreation Department, told the group that money is earmarked in the county's spending plans for lighting at the park.

"There are a lot of things that can be done with that park, and we're on a mission to work with the community to see what the community wants rather than for us to say what's best," said Hopkins.

Hopkins said the county has approved hiring a full-time staff member and a 20-hour per week staff member who should beef up the programming of recreational activities, he said.

The county and the city of Bradenton have already helped fund the construction of a picnic pavilion and the rehabilitation of the park's swimming pool. New signs that state the park's hours and rules have been ordered and will help police in patrolling the park, Hopkins said.

Plans are in the works to refurbish the basketball courts and possibly to upgrade some playground equipment, Hopkins said.

Residents expressed concerns about the condition of the sidewalks leading to the park - saying there are no sidewalks in some places - and the lack of a toddler playground.

Newell said if the park's equipment is refurbished and programming added, families will not only use the park more, as once was the case, but youths would have a nice place to go in their free time and be less likely to "get into mischief."

"Individuals tend to treat things a lot better when they're top quality things," **Newell** said. "When you've got raggedy materials in the beginning, the incivilities, like tearing things up, become a means to an end. It's different when you have nice, new stuff."

Hopkins said he and his staff will coordinate with other city and county departments to work on policing issues and other safety aspects, like extending sidewalks, for the park.

Mayor Bill Evers told the residents that the city is committed to helping the east Bradenton neighborhood improve its county-operated park.

"The city is here to help and cooperate with you in whatever way we can," Evers said. "We're not everywhere, and maybe we should be, but we do need people to call us and let us know the things they need so we can take care of it."

City Councilwoman Sandra Rahn addressed the issue of policing, telling the group that grant money had been allocated to hire eight police officers, some of whom will help patrol the park, but a lack of qualified applicants has slowed the hiring process.

"Don't think we've forgotten about you," Rahn said.