

City hopes Kiwanis Park upgrades done by mid-summer

By JACK FICHTER
Cape May Star and Wave

CAPE MAY — City Council approved a \$960,000 contract with Command Company Inc. for refurbishment of Kiwanis Community Park on Madison Avenue to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The project was offered for rebid when initial bids were too high. Chief Financial Officer Kevin Hanie said funding for the project was coming from capital budget line items for open space ac-

quisitions and improvements, improvements to buildings and grounds and a state Department of Community Affairs Small Cities Community Development Block Grant for \$400,000.

During public comment, former councilwoman Stacy Sheehan said \$550,000 was a lot of money to spend to make the park ADA compliant when the city's water tower needs repainted, which could cost \$1 million.

She said the water tower is overdue for repainting, which must be completed

every 10 years. City Manager Mike Voll said funds for repainting the water tower are in the 2024 capital budget.

Mayor Zack Mullock said the city had been waiting for a park on Lafayette Street for close to a dozen years. He said he hoped Kiwanis Park would be completed by mid-summer.

"It will be such a nice thing for our school children and our youth in the city," Mullock said.

It will also provide a walkway to the Cape May Tennis Club and the Emlen

Physick Estate from Madison Avenue, he said.

The renovations to the park will include a new play structure and soft surfaces for safety.

Last year, landscape architect Nichol Welsh, of Engineering Design Associates, said playground fixtures in the park were outdated and the park had about 20 trees in decline.

The DCA grant for handicap accessibility is not for just one type of disability but is for all "abilities and inabilities," serving those in wheelchairs and

walkers, autistic children, speech and sight impediments, Welsh said.

A handicap parking space will be provided on the site with six additional parking spaces created for a total of 12. A gazebo near

the pond would be painted and get some benches inside, Welsh said.

She said the poured-in-place soft rubber surfaces in several areas would be about 4 inches thick.

Harris

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the family Bible.

"I didn't find this Black doctor in there, but I saw a host of names I hadn't heard of. They were all family members," Harris said.

She learned James Still was an herbal doctor who taught himself medicine and lived in the Medford area, which is where the "tall pines" reference came from. She also learned he was the brother of William Still.

The Still family was large. "I found out that the first Black to come to Ocean City was a Still," she said.

"Our connection to the Still family is rather remote. My father said we were related, but to me it's rather remote."

Jacob Still, she noted, opened the first saltwater taffy shop in Ocean City. His business was in the Brower Building at Eighth Street and the boardwalk.

After her conversation with her aunt, she decided her contribution to the family history would be to pick one person, do the research and give the information to her aunt.

Little did she know what she was starting.

"I picked John Brooks Thompson because I liked the name. It turned out he was this great-grandfather who had come here right after turn of century, in 1900, and had this business handling baggage at the train station. He lived right at Seventh and West Avenue. He died in the 1920s so I never knew him but his house was only a block away," Harris said.

John Brooks Thompson was originally from Salem City in Salem County and his wife, her great-grandmother, also was from Salem County.

She was able to trace the line back to her great-great-grandfather who was born about 1805 and died in 1892 back in Salem. Harris said she tries to take back every family line into the 1700s, but couldn't quite get there with her great-grandfather.

This was supposed to be one contribution, she said, "but I was hooked."

"How can your great-grandfather live a block away and I didn't know it? And to boot was one of the founders of my father's church?"

She now lives in Upper Township and she has to drive down a little dirt road to get there and has to go by an old cemetery.

"For years I had been passing the cemetery where (my great-grandfather) was buried without ever knowing it," she said. "I think that's enough to get you hooked on the story. And learning about my family. In the process I was learning about other families and I had to spread out to get the big picture."

Harris has been doing research on her family for 30 years or so and as she did it, she began to get calls from other people asking her to help with their family history.

She added their histories to her tree on ancestry.com, a gift from her daughters, because the computer helps her research.

"I found so many people did not know their family history either. They knew even less than I did and when I shared the information, there is always a lot of emotion and a lot of tears. They were so happy and relieved to know who they were and how they fit in this world. I still help a



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Loretta Thompson Harris

lot of people because it's really rewarding."

"As I attach people to my family tree, it becomes a community tree," she added with a laugh. "I have profiles on over 80,000 people."

She said the large number of people isn't cumbersome because she does profiles one a time, some long, some short. She is now known as an Ancestry Ace.

The company asked her to split up the tree because it was so big, but she decided not to because then she would have too many trees. Her tree used to be public, but she made it private because she got so many requests she couldn't get to her own work. She also said people were copying the information but not taking the time to verify it. Just because she puts something down in her notes, it might not be correct, Harris explained.

She does volunteer information if she gets messaged.

Now she has "volumes and volumes" of it.

The Ocean City Historical Museum asked her to join its board because it realized it was lacking history about the African-American population in the resort. Harris agreed with the proviso she could use the museum's resources.

"The deal was, I'll help you if you help me. They have information here that's good. You start tying it all together. That's how I started work with museum. They showed interest in getting some African-American history here in the city. I thought that was a good thing."

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May 8, 2022

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(EAST OF BROADWAY)

May 9, 10, 11, 12 2023

(WEST OF BROADWAY)

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