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TOWN OF HUNTINGTON

1653 Foundation Aims To Improve Public Spaces

By Peter Sloggatt

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A new non-profit entity has been launched to raise the quality of life for Huntington residents without raising taxes.

The Town of Huntington's newest resident is the 1653 Foundation, a not-for-profit conceived as a means for individuals, businesses, local organizations and fellow charities to help develop and maintain parklands and recreation spaces in the town.

The group's founders note finding the funding to create new parks and public spaces; and to keep them maintained and running for the benefit of all, from sports leagues to passive park users, is among the biggest challenges faced by municipalities. Despite the proven benefits of greener communities and increasing demand for great community spaces, public dollars for funding Town parks can't keep up with the demand from a growing population.

That's where 1653 Foundation comes in. The name is a nod to the year when a group of Colonial settlers made "The First Purchase," perhaps the greatest real estate deal in the town's history. The foundation will raise private funds from businesses and individuals, and leverage grants for the benefit of the Town public parks and open spaces.

1653 is the brainchild of Robert Bontempi, Vice Chair of the Huntington Chamber of Commerce and Open Space EOSPA Committee Member; Brian Yudewitz, the Chamber's Chairman; Mark McAteer, principal of The Laurel Group; and Greg Wagner, Director of Parks and Recreation for the Town of Huntington.

"We will be proactive in using private dollars, coupled with public funding and grants to find those critical projects that will benefit the Town," Wagner said. "This is a model that New York City does extremely well. We can do that here."

"Huntington is a world class community renowned for its history, arts, museums, energetic downtowns and eclectic culture," Bontempi said. "It's parks and public spaces need to reflect that same status. The Foundation seeks to restore, maintain and enhance Huntington's open space, parklands and public spaces."

1653's Board of Patrons will work closely with the Town of Huntington to identify and fund projects consistent with the foundation's aims. The Committee has a "wish list" of potential park and public space improvement projects far bigger than the Town can budget for.

Mark McAteer, Principal of the Laurel Group and



The newly formed 1653 Foundation will raise funds to supplement local government funding to develop and maintain public parks and recreational spaces. The group's founders, from left, are: Brian Yudewitz, Huntington Chamber of Commerce Chairman; Greg Wagner, Huntington's Director of Parks and Recreation, Mark McAteer, Principal of The Laurel Group, and Bob Bontempi, Vice Chair of the Huntington Chamber of Commerce.

EOSPA Vice Chairman, is excited about taking the mission of the foundation and coupling it with the Town of Huntington's efforts to enhance neighborhoods, park and acquire open space. "1653 is built to foster public/private partnership in improving our town. We will be connecting corporate and private donors, community volunteers, elected leaders and staff in driving progress on the priorities of our community."

Now is an ideal time for an organization like this, Chamber Chairman Brian Yudewitz commented. "While the Town continues to grow and add businesses, we can put a spotlight on a holistic approach to progress, target smart growth that focuses as much on the environment, parks and public spaces as on the opportunity for a new or existing business."

The effort has been met with enthusiasm from Town officials.

"Taking the burden off the taxpayer embodies the new direction of fresh ideas and creative solutions we promised the Huntington community," Supervisor Chad Lupinacci said. "I'm proud to see Mr. Wagner's strong commitment to our parks, outside of his official responsibilities, come to fruition, and I look forward to collaborating with the 1653 Foundation to

continue beautifying and preserving our open space."

"I'm all for it – behind it 100 percent," Councilwoman Joan Cergol said. "We're very fortunate as a town to have had the opportunity to buy open space, but maintaining it is a lot. Those who founded the 1653 Foundation are active participants. They recognized more bandwidth is needed."

The concept is similar to that behind New York City's Central Park Conservancy and Prospect Park Foundation, Wagner said. "Essentially we are going to be able to bring public private partnerships together."

He noted that 1653 Foundation wants to hear from residents. "Feedback is critical to our mission," he said. "And we want people to think big."

The first project of the 1653 Foundation is an informal survey that asks respondents to help identify needs and create the 1653 "wish list." Results will be compiled into a report that will be published on the foundation's website and guide the foundation's future efforts.

"We ask respondents to be bold in their responses" said Bontempi, "be a change agent for our community".

To learn more, make a contribution or take the survey, go to 1653foundation.org.