

Niles Park District:
Junior Youth Baseball Field

One of the great additions provided by the Niles Park District (Park District) in 2017 was the addition of a new junior baseball/softball field at the northeast corner of Oak Park (Ottawa & Lee St.).

Park District staff built the new, smaller ball field to serve the 5–10 year old baseball and softball players who would need a smaller field. The field was a huge success, and the hundreds of young ball players who used it this past summer are looking forward to playing more ball next summer.

However, this first location turned out not to be a permanent solution, due to some legal and real estate issues.

Building this field required permits from the Village of Niles. Given the longstanding collegial relationship between the Niles Park District and the Village, the Park District assumed these permits would be a formality. The Park District received verbal approval to put fencing up around the field. The field would also include two concrete pads for dugouts, which the District applied for and received written permits. The pads were installed in June of last summer.

Play had already begun and was in full swing on the new smaller ballfield when, at the June 2017 Park District meeting three neighbors came to the June Park District Board Meeting demanding that the new ball field be removed. These residents had lived next to Oak Park for many years, and had never objected to the baseball that had been played on the full-sized ball diamond for decades, or the soccer that had been played on the field for years. Shortly thereafter, the Park District requested permits from the Village for roofs over the benches. Surprisingly, however, the Village declined those permits.

Although a portion of Oak Park is owned by the Park District, the other portion of the park is owned by the Village of Niles and leased by the District. The new, smaller ball field was located on this portion of the park.

The Village believed that a small junior baseball field violated that lease, which dates back to 1994 and was never previously enforced. So, the Village decided to rescind the permit for the concrete pads, which they had granted to the Park District weeks earlier, claiming that the permits were issued “by mistake.” After several rounds of discussion, the Village took the position that the Park District allegedly violated its lease agreement by allowing the junior field in that one corner of Oak Park and that the field should come down.

In an effort to be responsive to the few objectors, the Park District Board President and Executive Director met with the residents. It offered to install buffering and/or landscaping and to adjust the size of the backstop in an effort to make the neighbors comfortable with the park's activities. The objectors refused the Park District's offer and stated that they would consider filing a lawsuit to stop the baseball games unless the field was removed.

While still trying to resolve the situation, the Park District met with Village on September 8th to seek a compromise to keep the field at Oak Park. The Park District suggested that the Village could amend the 1994 lease so the Park District could keep the new field at Oak Park. The Village refused.

On October 17th, the Park District again met with Village staff and Mayor. At this meeting, the Village proposed a swap of properties in exchange for the Village not suing the Park District for what it believes to be a violation of the obscure 1994 lease. They offered to give the Park District the leased parcel at Oak Park and in exchange the Village would receive the Park District's much larger Golf Mill Park. While the Village claimed the Park District could use it in the future, those details were left out of the offer. In addition, the Park District would have to remove the junior baseball field at Oak Park and then, after the swap was complete, would have to reapply for permits to rebuild the field without any assurance that either the permits or future park district activities at Golf Mill Park would be allowed.

Determining that the proposed swap was one sided and not in its best interests, the Park District declined the Village's proposed land swap offer and simply removed the ball field during the month of November, eliminating any claims for litigation.

This winter, the Park District will select a suitable site for a new junior-sized ball field to be installed in spring 2018, so that once again Niles' young players can "play ball!"