



City of Ashtabula

Ashtabula City Council

Community Development/Economic Development/Parks & Recreation Committee Meeting

Wednesday, January 7, 2026 at 5:30 PM

Council Chambers

4230 Lake Avenue, Ashtabula, OH 44004

Minutes

Opening of Committee Meeting

Call to Order

The meeting of the Ashtabula City Council Community Development / Economic Development / Parks & Recreation Committee was called to order at 5:30 p.m. by Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo.

Roll Call

Members Present: Chair: Ward 5 Councilor Jane DiGiacomo, Member: Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman

Absent: Vice Chair: Ward 4 Councilor Jodi Mills, Clerk of Council Stacy Millberg

Officers Present: City Manager James Timonere

Parks and Recreation Board Members Present: Blake Hinkle, Tim Dibble

Visitors:

Sunshine Law Certification

A quorum was established as defined by the Ashtabula City Council Rules of Order. The meeting met the requirements of the Ohio Sunshine Laws Open Meetings Act.

Welcome and Acknowledgement of Visitors

Special Guest Presentation

Sharone Sing, Hubbard House Underground Railroad Museum

Sharone Sing, Chairman of the Board at the Hubbard House Underground Railroad Museum, provided an extensive presentation about the history of the Hubbard House and Ashtabula County's role in the Underground Railroad. He explained that while the Hubbard House represents one of the darkest periods in American history, it also showcases the good in humanity and people's willingness to stand up against injustice.

Mr. Sing detailed how the Hubbard family came from Connecticut and New York to Ashtabula in the early 1800s as abolitionists who were actively opposed to slavery. He explained the difference between being anti-slavery and being an abolitionist — the latter being willing to take action. The Hubbards initially established a hotel at East Point before William Hubbard built the house on Walnut Boulevard. They came to the area because their uncle, Nehemiah Hubbard, a Revolutionary War veteran, had purchased approximately 57,000 to 58,000 acres of land at 33 cents per acre as a reward for his service.

Mr. Sing described how the Hubbard House became a significant terminal in the Underground Railroad due to its location near Lake Erie and the Hubbard family's connections to shipping, lumber, and warehouse businesses. Freedom seekers were looking to reach Canada to truly be free from the Fugitive Slave Act, and the Hubbard House served as a holding station until ships could transport them across Lake Erie.

He emphasized that Ashtabula County was known for its strong anti-slavery stance, with the majority of residents refusing to recognize the Fugitive Slave Act. He mentioned local figures like Joshua Giddings, who represented

Ashtabula in congress for over 20 years and consistently spoke against slavery even when congress tried to silence him with the Atherton gag order. When Giddings was expelled from Congress for his stance, Ashtabula residents voted him back in.

Mr. Sing stated that another individual connected to the Hubbard family was Benjamin Wade, a senator for Ohio and an abolitionist. Benjamin Wade also believed women had the right to vote.

Mr. Sing also shared the story of "Uncle Jake," a skilled brick mason and former slave who helped build the Hubbard House itself. "Uncle Jake" was a fugitive slave who was found when the land for the Hubbard House was being surveyed.

In response to a question about connections to John Brown, Mr. Sing mentioned that investigators tried to connect John Brown to Ashtabula County residents, noting that four or five people caught with him were from the county.

Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo asked if Mr. Sing had any knowledge of a former house where the gas station at the corner of Bunker Hill and Austinburg Road is that was said to be part of the Underground Railroad. Mr. Sing noted that there were at least 21-22 Underground Railroad houses throughout Ashtabula County with several of them remaining in varying conditions. He stated that there were two other houses on Walnut Boulevard in addition to the Hubbard House.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman asked if the Hubbard House still held its annual pilgrimage. Mr. Sing stated that it is held the first Saturday in October. The pilgrimage allows people to visit historical sites related to the Underground Railroad.

City Manager James Timonere asked if there were specific needs the Hubbard House has with regard to the building and artifacts that are in the building that supporters can donate to. Mr. Sing explained that they are currently working on opening the cellar to the public with interactive displays and murals. He noted that the Hubbard House operates on donations and annual memberships. City Manager James Timonere asked about the Hubbard House's succession plans. Mr. Sing stated they are looking for more people to train for tours to ensure the organization's future.

City Manager's Report

City Manager James Timonere discussed two transportation initiatives the City has been working on. The first is an expansion of Amtrak services. He stated that the City has been in discussions with Amtrak about expanding service to connect the Detroit-Toledo-Cleveland corridor with the New York Empire corridor. That connection could potentially be called the Great Lakes Limited corridor. It would include stops along Ohio's Lake Erie coastline, potentially with a stop in Ashtabula at the old depot location. City Manager James Timonere explained that this initiative could provide affordable transportation options for residents and enhance tourism. A resolution of support will likely come before Council in February, and a local advocate for the project who is moving back to Ashtabula has offered to give a presentation.

The second initiative is the GoBus Ohio route to the City of Ashtabula. City Manager James Timonere stated that the City has been working with the county commissioners to secure a GoBus stop in Ashtabula. The GoBus network primarily serves college students and would connect Ashtabula to Cleveland and the existing GoBus routes throughout Ohio. This would improve access to public transportation for residents and boost tourism.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman asked if Pennsylvania would be included as a stop. City Manager James Timonere stated that the line runs through Pennsylvania and down to New York as part of the Empire Corridor. He believes there will be a few stops in Pennsylvania but he is not positive. He stated he would know more in February or March.

City Manager James Timonere also provided an update on the modular homes project for the Station Avenue area, noting that three homes need to be built by May through the Welcome Home Ohio program with the county Land Bank. These homes will be affordable through grant funding that offsets building costs, making homeownership possible for residents with moderate incomes.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman asked if there was any literature or information about the program that could be circulated. City Manager James Timonere stated that there is a company that will be handling that. Applications will

be available soon, with outreach to various agencies that deal with financial literacy, such as Catholic Charities and the Samaritan House, as well as local employers.

Parks & Recreation Committee Report

2025 State of the Parks

Tim Dibble, from the Parks and Recreation Board, presented a comprehensive "State of the Parks" report compiled from all 2025 Parks and Recreation Board reports. He stated that throughout the year, the board focused on visible infrastructure improvements, long-term planning, stewardship of levy resources, and strengthening public trust. He stated that the parks are in good condition going into 2026 and highlighted major achievements from 2025, including:

- Completion of the Walnut Beach Inclusive Playground
- Installation of new playground equipment on West 38th Street
- Completion of basketball and tennis courts at Smith Field
- Formal recognition and naming of Molded Fiber Glass Unity Park
- Safety improvements at South Park
- Successful park levy renewal approved by voters
- Continued high quality veterans and memorial programming such as Veterans Day, Memorial Day and Pearl Harbor Day

Mr. Dibble mentioned that the board is focusing on three major projects for 2026 as directed by the City Manager, including completing the fence at 38th Street Park and improvements to Clifford Kadon Presidential Park where they plan to move playground equipment forward for easier access by families and potentially adding a walking trail.

Mr. Dibble also reported that he has created a new member packet for future park board appointees to help with orientation, as many new members previously had no guidance when joining. This packet includes information about voting procedures and bylaws for advisory boards.

Ward 3 RoLesia Holman suggested recommending each of the City boards or commissions utilize a member packet as well. Mr. Dibble stated that he would forward the packet he created, and it could be distributed and tailored to the different boards and commissions.

November 22, 2025 Parks Board Minutes

Unfinished Business

Tree Legislation

The committee reviewed tree legislation titled "Keep Ashta-Beautiful Ordinance." After a brief discussion about technical aspects of the ordinance's codification and cross-referencing with existing tree ordinances, the committee agreed to move it forward.

Motion: Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman moved to forward the tree legislation to Council for consideration; Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo seconded.
Motion carried.

City Manager James Timonere stated that he would discuss the ordinance with the City Solicitor to determine the appropriate placement in the City code, and it would be formally requested at the January 20th meeting for consideration at the February meeting.

New Business

Appointments to Parks & Recreation Board, Lift Bridge Community Association, and Ashtabula Downtown Development Association

Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo announced the following liaison appointments:

- Parks and Recreation Board: Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo
- Lift Bridge Community Association: Ward 4 Councilor Jodi Mills

- Ashtabula Downtown Development Association: Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman

Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo noted that these appointments were being made to ensure Council is more involved with community organizations, as specified in the committee's description.

Next Meeting

February 4, 2026

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 6:52 p.m. by Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo.