

For Immediate Release

On Tuesday, September 5, a group of Cleveland Community leaders appeared before the Johnston County Commissioners to present a proposal to seek County assistance in the creation of a parks and recreation district that could acquire, develop, and maintain parks and athletic fields within the community. County Commissioners unanimously agreed to “authorize the County Manager and County Attorney to assist the Cleveland Community in working through the exploratory process, including possible state legislation and a voter referendum, to create a Parks and Recreation District that will allow the community to self-determine its future direction for acquiring land and developing recreational opportunities.” The recommended boundaries of the proposed new parks and recreation district would follow the current boundaries of the Cleveland Volunteer Fire District.

The group of Cleveland Community leaders included representatives of the Greater Cleveland Chamber of Commerce, the Cleveland Athletic Association, Pop Warner Football, the Cleveland Rotary Club, and the Cleveland Fire Department, as well as prominent community business owners, farmers, and developers. As background for the proposal, the group recounted the disappointment they experienced earlier this year when a community property owner wanted to donate 12 acres of land to the community for use as recreational space, and they became painfully aware that neither the County nor the Community had resources available to develop or maintain the property. Unlike most counties in North Carolina, Johnston County does not have a parks and recreation department. Johnston County has chosen to relegate the acquisition, development, and maintenance of parks and recreation to the incorporated towns within the county. As a result, unincorporated areas, like the Cleveland Community, are left with few sources from which to fund quality of life improvements like parks, walking trails, athletic fields, and open spaces. While the towns around Cleveland are investing millions in parks and recreation for their citizens, there isn’t a single public access playground, walking trail, or picnic table in the Cleveland Community of 27,000. (estimated population of the Cleveland Fire District)

The County also authorized the \$30,000 North Carolina Department of Commerce Downtown Revitalization grant allocated to the Cleveland Community by the 2017 General Assembly to be used “to fund expenses that will be necessary in the exploration, planning, and possible creation of a Cleveland Area Parks and Recreation District.” The leadership group hopes to have legislation ready to be considered in the 2018 session of the N.C. General Assembly and a general referendum for the Community to vote on in 2018. Much like the current fire district, a new parks and recreation district would be formed under the jurisdiction of the County and would be governed by a board of directors and a tax board. The leaders indicated that the first order of business for the newly formed district would be to acquire land in the community that could be used for playgrounds, walking trails, and athletic fields. “We are having to turn away children who want to play because we are out of places to hold practices and games”, said Scott Janes, Commissioner of the Cleveland Pop Warner Football Association. That sentiment

was also echoed by Michael Knott, President of the Greater Cleveland Athletic Association. “This is an exciting opportunity for the Cleveland Community to self-determine its future direction for improving the quality of life in our Community. Giving citizens the opportunity to vote on a new tax district where the funds will be used to acquire land and create recreational opportunities is the right thing to do”, says Denton Lee, the spokesperson for the group. He added, “We look forward to working with the County Manager, the County Attorney, and local legislators to authorize the formation of the new district.”