

ASBURY PARK PRESS

SUNDAY 07.31.16

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# Ortley residents rally for parkland

## Take plea for portion of OCUA land to meeting

JEAN MIKLE @JEANMIKLE

**BERKELEY TOWNSHIP** - Ortley Beach residents have lobbied unsuccessfully for years to convince the Ocean County Utilities Authority to allow use of a portion of its Fielder Avenue property as a public park.

So on Thursday, about 25 members of the Ortley Beach Voters and Taxpayers Association took their signs — and their plans for a portion of the 6.5 acres of OCUA land — to the authority's monthly meeting. "Parkland needed Ortley Beach," "Let People Use the OCUA Land They Paid For," and "This OCUA Open Space Should be a Park," the signs proclaimed.

"There is a desperate need for parkland and open space in Ortley Beach," said Paul Jeffrey, president of the taxpayers group. "...We came here because no one was willing to discuss this with us. We're asking for permission to use the eastern section of the property as a park."

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JEAN MIKLE/STAFF PHOTO

Ortley Beach residents outside the Ocean County Utilities Authority to press their point about parkland.

# Ortley

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Jeffrey estimated that the OCUA uses only about 20 percent of the property for its operations.

As Ortley has rebuilt from superstorm Sandy's devastation, the taxpayers group has been trying to find ways to improve the area for both residents and visitors, Jeffrey said. A new park would be a huge benefit to the area, he added.

John C. Parker, who chairs the OCUA's Board of Commissioners, said the authority needs the land as a staging area in emergencies, and as a

place to store equipment.

"We have lines all over that barrier island," Parker said. "...If anything goes wrong out there, we need that property for a staging area."

He said he would not support allowing a park on any portion of the land.

"It would be malfeasance in office if I let you take that property," Parker said.

But Parker said the rest of the commissioners may have different views. The commissioners will review the request by Ortley residents and discuss it again at a future public meeting, Parker said.

Eisenhower Avenue resident Sherman Barton said he'd like to have a place to walk his dog, to

relax and spend time with his nephew.

"We'd like to use a small piece of your property," Barton told the OCUA commissioners.

Fielder Avenue resident Mike Wymbs, who has lobbied for a park at the site for years, said the land does not belong to the OCUA, but to the ratepayers who support the authority.

"You owe it to the public to release the land for public purposes," Wymbs said.

Though 6.5 acres might seem like a small parcel in more rural parts of Ocean County, it's the largest plot of vacant land in densely developed Ortley Beach, located in the barrier peninsula section of

Toms River.

When large-scale development came to Ortley in the 1940s and 1950s, there was no provision for parkland. The only other public park in Ortley is township-owned Bayside Park, which was badly damaged during superstorm Sandy, but was reopened last summer.

Decades ago, the property between Fielder and Washington avenues housed a Toms River Sewerage Authority treatment plant. The OCUA acquired the land from Toms River, using about \$3 million in federal funds, Parker said. He said the authority had cleaned up the land after acquiring it from Toms River. The OCUA has a

pumping station on the western section of the land, near Washington Avenue. The facility collects raw sewage from much of the Barnegat peninsula and pumps it across the bay to the OCUA's central treatment plant in Berkeley.

Freeholder John C. Bartlett Jr. has said there are large pipes and an 880-volt electrical line beneath the property, and any park constructed on the site could not have any permanent fixtures. Any benches or other structures placed on the land would have to be removable, he said, because the property would be used as a staging area for emergency vehicles in the event of a storm or other

emergency.

After Sandy, the land was used for many months as a storage facility for waterlogged white goods — refrigerators, washers and dryers and other appliances — that were pulled from damaged houses in the area.

Bartlett, liaison to the county's Parks and Recreation department, has said the county has no objection to allowing a use of the portion of the property as a park, although he's pointed out that the land has always been used for industrial purposes. The Toms River Township Council supported the proposed park with a 2014 resolution.

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