

The Village and the School District A Statement by the Rockville Centre Village Board of Trustees

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Residents of Rockville Centre have recently been beset by a series of arguments from the Rockville Centre School District complaining of its treatment by the Village of Rockville Centre. We would like to have our say about the various issues.

Framing the Argument

The RVC School District complains, among other things, that it has been forced to pay for garbage service that it has gotten for free for many years. It says that free garbage service was part of a cooperative agreement and that in exchange the Village has use of two school buildings for summer recreation programs.

Much is left out of this framing of the facts.

First, the Village sees the use of those buildings as an exchange of recreational space for recreational space: in exchange for a program that uses two buildings for three hours a day for six weeks in July and August, the Village has provided the RVC School District, free of charge, with extensive access to the Village playing fields during the entire school year.

The last signed cooperative agreement between the Village and the RVC School District dates from April 1990 and provided for access to the Bligh/Ketler Little League Field, the Mill River Soccer Field and the Lister Baseball/Soccer Field for both practice and playing time. Not mentioned in that agreement, but added over the past 20 years, have been the use of Barasch Field for baseball, Tighe Field for daily physical education at Riverside School and the Skelos Sports Complex, which South Side High School has adopted as its home field for boys and girls soccer and lacrosse.

Sad to report, the high school athletic programs have been far less than considerate in their dealings with the Village's volunteer youth sports organizations, who also have a claim on these spaces, but who are often forced to delay their own scheduled times on these fields because the school teams feel entitled to them. The truth is that the sports organizations have a prior and greater claim to these spaces because their tax dollars pay for the maintenance of these fields and the administrative costs of scheduling the thousands of hours of use each year.

In addition, Molloy College is a 50-50 partner in the Skelos Complex, having paid half the costs of the purchase, installation and maintenance of the field turf there in exchange for access by its teams. If it wanted to, the Village could derive substantial revenue from renting out this highly desirable venue to the many sport leagues who would like to play there. But we don't.

From the Village's point of view, then, we have been providing the RVC School District with an increasing amount of time on an expanded roster of fields since 1990 while the Village's summer program has stayed about the same for the past 55 years. When we analyze the balance sheet in terms of time, the Village actually provides substantially more hours of access to the RVC School District than the RVC School District provides to the Village.

What About the Garbage

Because we feel that the exchange of recreational spaces, unbalanced as it is, is a separate issue, we have addressed the issue of providing Village garbage service separately.

In reviewing the serious economic situation we all have had to deal with as we prepared our budgets over the past few years, the Village has had to question long-held assumptions about what costs the Village must finance, what costs the Village is not required to finance and what costs the Village simply cannot afford to finance, as desirable as they might otherwise be. It is true that the Village has for years provided free garbage pick-up to the RVC School District and the practice was memorialized in the April 1990 agreement.

However, the document contemplated sharing services without costs to one another; it did not actually state that the Village would pick up the School District garbage for free. Further, the agreement itself lapsed years ago and the cost to the Village of providing garbage service has increased substantially since 1990.

The Village does not provide free garbage service to anyone except the RVC School District. Individual homeowners pay for this service through their real property tax, but the School District is tax exempt. Commercial locations also pay property taxes and, unless they choose to use a private carting service, they pay the Village an additional charge for any garbage over 250 pounds per week. Likewise non-profits, such as houses of worship, pay a fee for garbage service. Governmental entities in Rockville Centre such as the U.S. Postal Service and the M.T.A. Long Island Bus Depot, also pay for Village garbage service.

Therefore, late last year, we notified the RVC School District that, effective with the New Year, the Village would bill the School District at the same rate that it bills all other accounts. We estimated that the cost would be \$40,000 a year. The District declined to continue with Village sanitation services and contracted with a private carter.

‘Double Tax’ Doubletalk

The RVC School District has been arguing that charging for sanitation amounts to a “double tax” since individual homeowners have already paid for garbage service when they paid their property taxes to the Village. There are at least two verbal tricks here: one is to confuse Village taxes with RVC School District taxes and the other is to confuse taxes with fees for service.

When the individual Village property owner pays Village property taxes, the property owner receives in return the full menu of Village services, including garbage collection, up to 250 pounds per week. When residents of the RVC School District pay the separate (look at your tax bill) School District tax, they are paying for School District expenses, which include the cost of its own garbage disposal.

In addition to taxes, municipalities may charge fees for services. This is what we do when we charge commercial and non-profit accounts for trash pick-up in excess of 250 pounds per week. It is what we do when we charge for water and electricity because Rockville Centre also operates municipal utilities (at great savings to its residents, by the way). These services are not paid for by property taxes and cannot be provided for free.

The situation is further complicated because the Village of Rockville Centre and the Rockville Centre School District are not only separate governmental entities, they also have different boundaries. Most Village residents live in the RVC School District, but others live in the Oceanside or Baldwin school districts and pay property taxes to them. Conversely, some residents of the RVC School District do not live in the Village and so pay no property taxes here.

The future

The RVC School District has suggested that unless the Village restores free garbage service to the RVC School District, the District will be compelled to exclude the Village Recreation Department from using the two grammar schools for its summer program.

We do not think that the issue of garbage service should be linked to the current exchange of recreational space, an exchange we feel is heavily in the School District's favor; but if the School District insists on such linkage, then the Village will have to reassess the access it now provides to its fields and facilities.