

# **What One Adaptive Turf Baseball Field Taught Us About Governance, and the Future of Park Foundations**

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## **Executive Summary**

Park foundations are often measured by how much money they raise. In reality, fundraising is only the beginning. The true measure of a successful park foundation is its ability to navigate the intersection of philanthropy and local government while maintaining public trust, honoring donor intent, respecting public accountability, and continuing to move projects forward when challenges arise. This is the story of a adaptive turf baseball field, a community that stepped forward, and the lessons learned when philanthropy met the realities of the local government process. More importantly, it is a reminder to new and emerging park foundations that experiencing challenges does not mean the model has failed. In many ways, these moments are where the model proves its value.

## **The Foundation**

The St. Johns County Parks Foundation was created for one purpose: to enhance the St. Johns County Parks and Recreation Department through private philanthropy. Unlike traditional "Friends of" groups that support a single park or program, our Foundation supports the entire county parks system. Our goal is simple: not to replace government funding, but to help our tax dollars go further.

Our partnership with St. Johns County is guided by a formal Memorandum of Understanding. We maintain insurance, provide financial reporting, and follow nonprofit governance standards. Unlike many nonprofit organizations, the Foundation exists solely to support the St. Johns County Parks and Recreation Department. We do not fund or operate programs outside of that mission. Each year, we report our work, results, and community impact to the Board of County Commissioners. The Board then votes on whether to continue investing in the Foundation through an annual operating allocation.

Since 2020, the Board has approved an annual investment of \$120,000 in the Foundation's operations. That investment was not spent on a single project or program. Instead, it gave the Foundation the ability to generate more than \$1 million for St. Johns County Parks and Recreation through private fundraising,

grants, business partnerships, volunteer service, land donations, community-led projects, park enhancements, and countywide programs.

In other words, the Board of County Commissioners is not simply funding another nonprofit. It is investing in an organization that multiplies their residents tax dollars by bringing new funding, new partnerships, and new opportunities to St. Johns County Parks and Recreation that otherwise would not exist.

## **The Community Need**

One of the Foundation's priority projects was replacing the specialized synthetic turf at the County's only fully accessible baseball field. The field is home to a growing adaptive baseball program serving children with disabilities from St. Johns County and neighboring counties.

The County had already invested approximately \$1.5 million to expand parking, improve ADA accessibility, and construct new concession and restroom facilities. Replacing the turf was the final piece of the project, but it did not fit within the \$1.5 million budget and remained in need of replacement.

The Foundation stepped in as the philanthropic partner. The league made a significant contribution to the campaign, while the Foundation worked with donors, businesses, grant-makers, and community partners to raise the remaining funds needed to fully fund the project. This allowed the league to stay focused on what it does best, serving families and getting kids on the field.

"There is a huge need for activities like this that serve children with special needs." — League supporter and special needs professional, The Arc St. Johns

According to the league, 278 athletes were expected to participate in the 2026 fall season.

## **The Community Responded**

The Foundation launched a fundraising campaign. Businesses contributed. Residents donated. Grants were awarded. Community partners stepped forward. Together, they demonstrated something larger than financial support. They demonstrated trust. Every contribution represented someone saying, "This matters." The campaign reached its fundraising goal in less than a year.

It would have been easy to believe the hard part was over. It wasn't.

## When Fundraising Ends, Stewardship Begins

One of the greatest misconceptions about park foundations is that raising the money completes the project. In reality, fundraising marks the beginning of an entirely different phase. Once charitable dollars become part of a public project, additional responsibilities emerge. Amongst them, legal review, procurement. Contracts, Insurance, Risk management, Nonprofit stewardship and Public accountability.

Every one of these responsibilities exists for a reason. They protect public assets, taxpayer resources, donor confidence, and the integrity of both government and philanthropy. None of them should be viewed as obstacles.

They are essential to public trust.

What we learned, however, is that even when every party shares the same goal, successful implementation depends on more than good intentions. It requires exceptional communication, clearly defined expectations, and a shared understanding of process before fundraising ever begins.

| Date               | Project Milestone                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Winter 2024</b> | St. Johns County Parks and Recreation identified the need to replace the specialized synthetic turf at the County's only fully accessible baseball field, and asked SJCPF to partner.                                               |
| <b>May 2024</b>    | The St. Johns County Parks Foundation Board of Directors voted to adopt the project as a Foundation-led fundraising initiative.                                                                                                     |
| <b>Nov. 2024</b>   | With grant applications pending and pledges made for the new year. The Foundation made an advance payment to reserve the turf and secure the installation in time for the park's January 2025 grand opening.                        |
| <b>Dec. 2024</b>   | The Foundation was informed that the developer managing the larger park construction project could not accommodate a second contractor working on-site. As a result, the turf installation was rescheduled for May 2025.            |
| <b>Jan. 2025</b>   | The Grand Re-opening was scheduled. The Foundation worked with the league, donors, businesses, grantmakers, and community partners to successfully raise remaining funds.                                                           |
| <b>Feb. 2025</b>   | The proposed turnkey donation project entered legal questioning.                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Feb. 2025</b>   | The County completed approximately \$1.5 million in accessibility improvements, including expanded parking, ADA improvements, and new concession and restroom facilities. Major gift by Field of Dreams Association award to SJCPF. |
| <b>Apr. 2025</b>   | Following review by County Administration, Legal, and Procurement staff, the Foundation-led turnkey project was denied by staff to advance to the Board of County Commissioners for consideration and vote.                         |

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|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>May 2025 (Planned)</b>         | <p>Construction was originally scheduled to begin. The estimated installation time was six weeks, allowing the field to be completed before the 2026 adaptive fall baseball season.</p> <p>County staff made a request to the turf company, that the funds be returned to the foundation, and then the foundation give the funds directly to the county.</p> |
| <b>July 2026 (Current Status)</b> | <p>As of the publication of this case study, the county has no timeline on the refund to the foundation. Construction has not begun, nor has a construction timeline has been established.</p> <p>The adaptive baseball league's 2026 fall season has been canceled.</p>                                                                                     |

## The Unexpected Challenge

Throughout the project, the Foundation relied on the governance practices and professional education it had intentionally invested in. We asked questions. We sought guidance. We respected legal review. We worked through procurement. We protected donor intent. We honored our governing agreements. At every step, our objective was not simply to complete a project, but to steward charitable dollars responsibly. During implementation, additional legal and procurement considerations emerged that had not been anticipated during the fundraising phase. Those considerations changed the project's implementation path and ultimately delayed construction beyond the anticipated completion date. As this case study is being written, construction has not yet begun and the adaptive league's 2026 fall season has been canceled.

No one wanted that outcome. No one celebrated that outcome. Yet it happened.

Not because anyone lacked commitment. Not because anyone questioned the importance of the project. But because even well-intentioned partnerships can lose momentum when expectations, timelines, or operating practices are not clearly aligned.

*As Executive Director, I realized the dollars raised was not equivalent to success.*

*At the park's grand opening, I spoke with a mother whose daughter has cerebral palsy. She told me this was the only sports league her daughter could participate in because of the playing surface. It was safer for her condition, and it was close enough to home to make participation possible.*

*What humbled me wasn't simply that her daughter had the opportunity to play. It was the happiness in her mother's voice as she described her daughter finally having something designed for her. Even more meaningful was the joy she expressed about the friendships her daughter had made, friendships that never would have existed had she not been part of this league.*

*In that moment, something became very clear to me. The greatest loss wasn't organizational. It wasn't about the Foundation, the County, or the Parks & Recreation Department. It was personal.*

*The community had already chosen to support these children by helping us reach our fundraising goal. Yet the 278 athletes who were expected to participate in the inaugural 2026 fall season will not have that opportunity.*

*That, to me, was the greatest loss.*

## **A Lesson About Governance**

If we could begin this project again, we would start differently.

Even with a Memorandum of Understanding in place, even as the County's philanthropic partner, and even with startup funding provided by the County to carry out this type of work, those things ultimately made no difference.

Before fundraising begins, we would bring everyone to the same table: Parks and Recreation, County Administration, legal counsel, procurement, Foundation leadership, and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Board of County Commissioners. The goal wouldn't be to get everyone to agree immediately. It would be to give every partner the opportunity to ask questions, raise concerns, and work together toward a solution before the project begins.

Throughout this project, new perspectives entered the conversation at different stages. Each raised valid questions, but each also introduced new decisions that affected the timeline.

If gathering everyone in one meeting isn't possible, those conversations should still take place, whether in person or by email, before fundraising begins.

Getting expectations in writing isn't about mistrust. It's about creating a shared understanding of the path forward. Good intentions are important, but they are open to interpretation. Clear expectations, documented agreements, and early collaboration help identify who has the authority to make decisions before a project begins. That may seem obvious, but in our experience, it wasn't.

## **Why Education Matters**

Park foundations require professional development and ongoing support because of the unique responsibilities that come with working alongside

government and serving as stewards of public and private funds. From the beginning, we sought guidance from experienced nonprofit professionals, but even many of those experts were not familiar with the unique framework of public-philanthropic partnerships.

That realization led us to invest in the National Association of Park Foundations —not because membership guarantees success, but because it helps us become better stewards. Through NAPF, we have access to governance resources, peer learning, ethical guidance, webinars, conferences, and conversations with foundations that have faced many of the same challenges. There is rarely one perfect answer, but there is almost always someone who has walked a similar path.

Those conversations gave us the confidence to ask better questions, seek greater clarity, respectfully advocate for our donors, and continue learning. Without that support, we might have accepted the uncertainty and stopped asking questions long ago.

While the project itself did not end the way we had envisioned. Our persistence revealed something important: there were gaps in the process and a lack of clarity about roles, expectations, and decision-making.

That is not a victory for this project. The children and families deserved better than that.

It is, however, a victory for the future. By continuing to ask questions, document the experience, and seek clarity, we are helping build a stronger foundation, not just for our organization, but for future partnerships between philanthropy and government. If this experience leads to clearer expectations, better communication, and a more transparent process for the next community project, then the lessons learned here will continue to serve the public long after this project ends.

## **To New Park Foundations**

If you're building a new park foundation, there may be moments when you wonder whether the model works. Keep going. These are simply opportunities to create better processes, stronger communication, and clearer expectations.

Ask the obvious questions. Ask the uncomfortable questions. Document everything. And keep Learning from every project. The goal isn't perfection. The goal is to serve the community through stewardship.

## **Closing Reflection**

Every donation is more than a financial contribution, it is a vote of confidence.

Our responsibility is to honor that confidence, not only by raising funds, but by stewarding them with integrity, transparency, and humility. We are accountable to our communities. We are accountable to our donors and neighbors because we also live, work and play in it.

We are accountable through our partnership with St. Johns County. And we voluntarily hold ourselves accountable by investing in education, governance, and professional development through the National Association of Park Foundations because our community deserves a foundation that never stops learning.

In the end, this case study isn't about just a turf field. It's about the responsibility that comes with asking a community to come together and join our local government to achieve something bigger than ones self. When each of us fulfills our role, and when we remain committed to learning from one another, our parks become stronger than any one organization could make them alone.

Because public parks belong to everyone. And when we work together, everyone wins. When we don't, everyone feels it.