

**From:** [Will Determan](#)  
**To:** [City Council and Mayor](#)  
**Cc:** [Abraham, Keith](#)  
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Let's talk about O'Neal Park!

I'd like to bring attention to O'Neal Park. For those who are unaware, recently O'Neal Park was a popular topic as the city council was considering replacing it with the new indoor aquatic center. Ultimately the city decided against using the area, and instead is using the initial spot of the Iowa department of transportation lot. This was partly because of the backlash that this idea got from the residents that live near the park. It seemed like the general consensus was that to many of the people the park was an important part of the neighborhood. With the city's decision to use the IDOT lot instead, it would seem that the city council would also agree that it is an important part of the city. I feel that for many people who do not regularly use O'Neal Park this would be the end of the story. I personally believe that if we are going to keep O'Neal Park, then it is important to talk about how it could be improved and to try and be aware of the issues this park has.

The Good

Before I get into the problems of O'Neal Park, let's first talk about the things people enjoy about the park, and why people thought it was worth saving in the first place. I think this is a good time to mention that I live near O'Neal park, and my wife and I visit the park multiple times a day. Because of this I have a very good idea of what is most used at the park.

It's important to mention that the location of the park is one of it's greatest strengths. It currently resides between two high density housing zones. One on S Oak Ave. and one on S 4th St. The vast majority of parks in Ames are not close to high density housing at all. Brookside, Inis Grove, Moore, River Valley, and Emma McCarthy Lee, are all located next to Low density zones. This is a great reason to invest in O'Neal Park given that it would benefit a large amount of people living in this area.

I'd like to give a brief summary of what my Wife and I have seen when visiting the park multiple times a day for the last few years. The playground and the basketball courts are far and away the most popular pieces of O'Neal Park. I'd argue that most people who spend more than an hour at the park are more than likely spending it at either the playground or the basketball courts. I can honestly say as an adult without kids, I haven't used either so I can not speak to the quality of these amenities, but from an outsider's perspective, they are clearly extremely important to the families that frequent the park.

The next most popular amenity is the picnic tables. Often you will see people using the picnic tables for a party, or more casual use. I don't really have much to say about this except that there are only two tables and no shelters. Meaning it feels that only very small gatherings are possible since there is a lack of seating and table options.

The last and least popular amenity is a point of contention, and is a large part of what is keeping O'Neal from becoming a better park overall. That being the Ballfield.

## The Bad

I want to first say that I personally love baseball. I played it in high school, I watch professional baseball regularly, and I genuinely believe it's a great sport for kids to get into at a young age. I think many parents in the neighborhood enjoy having the baseball diamond for their young kids to practice baseball or softball for the first time.

I think a few things are important not to forget

The Ballfield is by far the least popular aspect of O'Neal Park by a wide margin. Only being able to be used during the warmer months, this cuts its usability down to 5-6 months of the year. In that 5-6 month range it is primarily used by very young children to practice baseball or softball. There is sometimes the occasional game of kickball, cricket, or wiffleball. Even still, I would guess that maybe 20 days a year are people actively using the Ballfield, and I am being as generous as I can be with that number.

There are many other Ballfields in Ames. While none would be as close to this neighborhood as O'Neal Park, there are many that are still relatively close in proximity and walking distance. The next closest would be at Brookside park where there are four Ballfields which are a 10-15 minute walk from O'Neal Park.

Ballfields take a lot of space. I would estimate O'Neal Park's Ballfield takes up around 75% of the entire park. Almost every other park with a ballfield is significantly larger. These parks typically have plenty of space available for the ballfields, which makes them feel far less intrusive to the park as a whole. It's important to critically take a look at O'Neal Park and ask ourselves what we want out of it. There is a finite amount of space available, and that means we should try and use the space as optimally as possible.

No matter where you stand on Ballfields, everyone who has visited O'Neal Park regularly has noticed the lack of paths and sidewalks. This is something I have already brought up to the city council, but I think it's worth mentioning that only two of the four sides have a sidewalk. Which means that the other 50% is inaccessible to anyone who is in a wheelchair.

The term "Green Space" is often used when talking about O'Neal Park. While I do see how someone could look at O'Neal and think it's great that there is an open green space, I think if you actually visit O'Neal Park you will find the green open space almost never has anyone using it. This is because, in the warmer months, people tend to stay in the shade. In fact it's rather uncomfortable to be out in the hot sun for any amount of time. This means that the vast majority of people are only going to use the 25% of the park that has shade from trees. While I understand the appeal of green space, I think adding more trees for shade is something that many other parks do with great success.

## Possible solutions

Considering all the previously stated points, I would like to propose some possible solutions for O'Neal Park. If we were to remove the Ballfield then we could add paths on all four sides and another running diagonally across the park. Plant trees around the paths, add benches, and maybe add a garden or a fountain in the south east corner. We could also add a shelter or more picnic tables. These changes would completely overhaul O'Neil Park into a much more

welcoming and walkable area.

### Conclusion

I think if you take a look at other parks in Ames, you'll find many of them push walkability first and other amenities second. If we were to be open minded about this approach it's easy to see the issues that are inherent with O'Neal Park. A park should be a safe welcoming place, where anyone can come and enjoy being outside. We owe it to all the people of this neighborhood to make O'Neal Park as good as it can be.

Thank you,

Will Determan