

Secaucus charging 'environmental impact fee' despite parking fee ban at Field Station: Dinosaurs

Published: Monday, June 11, 2012, 7:18 AM

By Charles Hack/The Jersey Journal

SECAUCUS — Question: When is a parking fee not a parking fee?

Answer: When it's an "environmental impact fee."

At least that's what town officials in Secaucus and officials of the recently-opened Field Station: Dinosaurs attraction at Laurel Hill Park are saying about a \$10 fee visitors have to pay to park at the 22.5-acre animatronic dinosaur park.

And the difference is important.

Laurel Hill Park is located in the Meadowlands District, a 30.4-square-mile area along the Hackensack River covering parts of 14 municipalities in which commercial parking fees in recreational areas are banned. But environmental impact fees are not.

Secaucus council members passed a resolution May 22 requiring Field Station: Dinosaurs to collect the fee, arguing the charge would encourage visitors to use public transportation to get to the attraction, officials said.

And the town keeps the money.

The fee charged at the 492-parking space lot will be used to improve open space, parks and recreation facilities throughout the town, including renovating the town's Little League field, said Town Administrator David Drumeler, noting that Field Station: Dinosaurs leases its land from a county agency.

"We do not get any tax revenue from Field Station Dinosaurs and the county has a \$1 million lease," Drumeler said. "Police, firefighters and EMTs are the responsibilities for the town and there is also an environmental impact of vehicles coming to town."

Field Station: Dinosaurs officials have no problem with Secaucus pocketing the money, but Freeholder Bill O'Dea of Jersey City wants the arrangement reexamined.

O'Dea doesn't believe there should be parking at the dinosaur-themed park, but if there is, he believes the county should get the money.

"We did not want the traffic to interfere with the quiet and peaceful enjoyment of public park by residents of Hudson County," O'Dea told The Jersey Journal. "Whatever the environmental impact occurs, whether it's traffic or pollution from cars, happens on a county road and to Laurel Hill Park."

The county is already making money from the park.

Field Station: Dinosaurs subleases its land from the Hudson County Improvement Authority. The agreement calls for a payment of \$1 million for three years.

The HCIA leases the land from the county for \$1 a year.

The HCIA will receive 50 cents for every admission fee over 350,000 admission fees paid in a given calendar year. Of that money, the HCIA keeps 10 percent and the county gets 90 percent, according to the contract between the county and the HCIA.

Field Station: Dinosaurs President Guy Gsell sees the \$10 fee as part of Secaucus' "green initiative."

"I agreed to collect an environmental impact fee. I am not charging for parking and have no plans to charge for parking," Gsell said to The Jersey Journal. "I agree with the Town of Secaucus' green initiative and would prefer visitors to take the train."

Asked about the parking fee and which entity should keep the money, county spokesman Jim Kennelly said county administration wasn't involved with negotiating the contract with Field Station: Dinosaurs.

Any issues, he added, can be revisited when the HCIA lease with Field Station: Dinosaurs expires at the end of 2014.

Field Station: Dinosaurs opened on Memorial Day and features more than 30 life-sized, electronically-controlled dinosaurs, including the 90-foot long Argentinosaurus, the largest animatronic dinosaur ever made.