

by Jason M Kelly 4 years ago

Gating Westfield's Commons

Privatization, the public, and the commons in a small Midwest exurb.

Westfield is a city in central Indiana, just north of Indianapolis. Over the last decade, it has transformed itself from a small, nondescript midwest town into a rapidly growing exurb.

Boosting its population (and its tax revenue) through a series of strategic annexations, Westfield has set its sights on being more than just another sleepy suburb. Like its neighbor Carmel, it wants to become known nationally for its family friendly atmosphere, good schools, green space, and thriving economy. Where Carmel wants to become an arts destination, Westfield plans to become a destination city for youth sports.

With planning begun in 2008, the Westfield City Council has approved the construction Grand Junction -- a nearly 2000 acre environment which will include a sports complex, housing, entertainment, and commercial spaces. The 400 acre sports complex, opened in 2014, currently has "31 multi-purpose fields, 26 outdoor diamonds, 2 indoor facilities and over 10 miles of paved trails."

In order to fund the first phase of the project, the city raised \$45 million through a bond issue.



Grand Park Flyover Animation

 CITYOFWESTFIELDIN · 6 YEARS AGO



\$225M Westfield project in works

"That's our industry, and it means this whole area is ripe for commercial development."

Real estate experts say the village will likely have to prove its popularity before attracting retail and restaurants such as this rendering envisions.

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From the start, both city leaders and developers have been clear about the economic motives for creating the Grand Park. Tourism and a growing population could inject revenue into the city's coffers. For their part, developers have benefited from huge contracts, financed by the citizens of Westfield. If the project succeeds, both the city and the developers have much to gain. If the project fails, developers still get substantial profits from their contacts.

In other words, the public has taken the primary financial risk -- a win-win situation for private developers.

From the beginning, those leading the project have been open about this. The Mayor of Westfield, Andy Cook, stated in 2013 that "[The idea is that if we as a city invest public money in creating an environment conducive to doing business, the private sector will invest in our city.](#)" The corollary is that if the environment is not conducive -- i.e. if the venture fails -- the private sector will not invest in the city. And, the city will be on the hook for \$45 million.

In many ways, the city's future is tied to the success of the Grand Park project. And, city leaders have decided that other significant financial outlays are necessary in order to support it. In order to raise the money for these projects, the Westfield City Council voted in 2012 to sell its water and wastewater utilities to Citizens Energy Group.



Citizens agrees to buy Westfield utilities for \$91M

The city of Westfield said Monday morning that it has agreed to sell its water and wastewater utilities to Citizens Energy Group for \$91 million. Proceeds of the sale will be used to pay the city's entire utility infrastructure debt, which amounts to \$45 million.

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After paying off the city's outstanding debt, Westfield ended up with \$44 million in its coffers. Of this, \$25 million was set aside for infrastructure improvements, and \$2.5 million was for a new high school stadium.

Approximately \$2 million has been designated for what might be characterized as a vanity project -- a set of two towers flanking the interstate. Mayor Andy Cook describes them as follows: "[The need for something impactful is because of the uniqueness \(of the project\). We're trying to brand Westfield... Make an impact on visitors that says this is Westfield, Ind.](#)"



Westfield Towers would 'brand' the city

As Westfield continues to grow and develop, Mayor Andy Cook wants to create an identity for the city to distinguish itself along U.S. 31. The "Westfield Towers," a pair of 100-foot towers, would provide a new iconic landmark for the city. Cook said the structure combines a masonry base with metal-mesh and a top with lights.

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If using public funds to cover the financial risk of building Grand Park and selling off Westfield's public utilities was not enough to ruffle citizens' feathers, unexpected costs and lack of revenue have added to their frustrations.

In order to cover their losses, in August 2014, the Westfield City Council voted 5-1 to lend the project \$6 million from the city's infrastructure fund -- the money from the sale of the city's water utilities.



Surprise costs, shortfalls bust Westfield Grand Park budget

A contractor dispute, sponsorship shortfalls and site upgrades have pushed the \$45 million Grand Park project over budget. The Westfield City Council this month voted 5-1 to lend the project \$6 million from a city infrastructure fund, money that the administration said would be repaid through future sponsorship revenue and possible litigation windfalls.

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One would think that for all the risk and financial outlay that Westfield's citizens have made that upon completion of the sports complex, their children would be able to take advantage of the park.

However, this is not the case.

"While giving a media tour of the Grand Park sports complex one morning in June, a park official spotted three children playing on a baseball field.

Beneath an overcast sky with mild temperatures, it was one of the few signs of life all morning; aside from soccer tryouts, the park's 57 fields were deserted.

The official stopped the golf cart, got out and walked over to the kids. Then he asked them to leave."



Westfield Grand Park's 'industry' focus riles residents

While giving a media tour of the Grand Park sports complex one morning in June, a park official spotted three children playing on a baseball field. Beneath an overcast sky with mild temperatures, it was one of the few signs of life all morning; aside from soccer tryouts, the park's 57 fields were deserted.



Three children denied the right to play on a publicly financed baseball field, which was otherwise going unused - - this is where the above stories begin to converge.

There is a logic to all of this. Grand Park was not designed for the public. It was designed for the businesses that would benefit from its construction.

Mayor Andy Cook has made a definitive statement on the matter.

"Perhaps we should (say) the Grand Sports Complex, because the word 'park' implies public, open use . . . And the use of the facility — the park is actually an industry. It is the industry of travel team, family sports. It is not designed to be used as a public park for several reasons, not the least of which is the quality of the facility." -- Westfield Mayor Andy Cook

Despite the public's investment, these parks have been privatized. Just as with the public utilities, Westfield's representatives have sold off their property. They have asked the public to take the risk -- to build out infrastructure -- and then have handed it to a private corporation which could take the profit.

In the case of Grand Park, there is the promise that the debt will be repaid through tax revenue, but there is no guarantee. In the meantime, publicly financed parks have been walled off from the citizenry.

Astute citizens should be concerned about where any potential public revenues from the Grand Junction might be directed, especially since "Westfield is now in the entertainment business," as one developer has observed.

This story is not unique to Westfield. What is happening in this city is a microcosm of what is happening across the country -- at the small town, city, state, and federal levels. With variations over hundreds of years, it is another historical example of the commons being wrested from the control of the citizenry and handed over to private interests -- a process that might more generally be called, "enclosure."

We are living through an historical moment in which enclosures are increasing. Public property is being handed over to corporations (through sales and rentals of roads, utilities, and schools) while our representatives are shifting corporate risk over to the public (as we saw with the bank scandals of 2008).

And, as has been the case with so many other historical examples of enclosure, it is necessary for the citizens to assert their rights to the commons. It is essential to petition and protest the process of enclosure.

Westfield is a small city, and the rights of a few kids to access baseball fields may seem like a small thing, but these are symptoms of larger processes and attitudes. And, it is up to the citizenry to stand up and claim their right to the commons.

Be sure to voice your opinion by contacting the Office of the Westfield Mayor and the Westfield City Council:

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