

## Choate donates \$20,000 toward repairs at Wallingford park

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By Kate Ramunni, Record-Journal staff

WALLINGFORD — The town will have an additional \$20,000 to use to restore the playground at Doolittle Park thanks to a donation from Choate Rosemary Hall.

The playscape at the playground was heavily damaged by fire on Oct. 29, leaving it unusable and in need of replacement. The town has submitted a claim with its insurance company, but Choate wanted to make sure the town has the resources to not only replace but enhance the park, Choate Chief Communications Officer Alison Cady said.



“We had a meeting with the mayor to introduce some new members of our team and had a chance to connect face to face, and as part of that conversation, we were talking about Wallingford, things that are going on, and hearing about the fire incident at Doolittle was just particularly concerning to us,” Cady said.

“We had had a conversation with the mayor about the needs of our students here at Choate as we’ve seen since COVID, and we felt like we wanted to make sure that that recreational resource could be reestablished and maybe built back even better for children and families to use as soon as possible,” she said.

The item was on the Town Council’s consent agenda at its meeting last week. Items on the consent agenda are approved in one motion unless a council member chooses to remove it to be voted on separately. Councilman Jason Zandri requested to remove the item from the consent agenda because, he said, he felt that Choate deserved to be recognized for its actions.

“Over the years, whether I was on the council or even before I was on the council, there’s this polarization when it comes around to Choate Rosemary Hall. A lot of times we get into different conversations of Choate’s status in town, the things that they do, the properties they buy and remove from the tax rolls, requests they make of the town, and a lot of times these things come back as, ‘what does Choate do for Wallingford?’” Zandri said.

“A lot of times you can’t pinpoint or outline something, so I just wanted to take this opportunity — and I’ll apologize to Choate in advance, I think their intention was to do this without fanfare,” he said. “They met with the mayor, they had a discussion and they made this donation but I wanted to call it out.”

While he has been critical of Choate when he deemed necessary, and given them credit when due, he wanted to get the donation on the record with the town’s thanks, Zandri said.

“For them to acknowledge the different things that are going on in the town, a town they they are a part of and are as invested in as the rest of us, to say that they were also upset about what happened at Doolittle Park and to step forward with a \$20,000 check toward any efforts that we make through our insurance and whatever else that we might do to reestablish the gathering place, I just felt it was kind of important to call it out,” Zandri said. “I understand the possibility of Choate wanting to do this and let it go, but I just wanted to bring it to the forefront.”

Council Chairman Vincent Cervoni said that when the money from the donation is allocated, it will again come before the council, at which time he would like a school representative to be in attendance so town officials can offer their thanks.

Park neighbors saw the playscape in flames around 11:30 that night, two days before Halloween and the night before what has been known as Mischief Night, and called the fire department. While the fire was extinguished quickly, the playscape was ruined.

It's believed it will cost about \$60,000 to replace the playscape. The same model is still manufactured today and readily available for order. The cost is expected to be covered by insurance, which would allow Choate's donation to go toward work beyond replacing the playscape.

Police investigated the incident and believe three juveniles are responsible.

The donation comes as town officials discuss ongoing concerns over park maintenance.

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