

# The Source

For Shelby Township and Utica

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# Chief Gene Shepherd Park opens to public

**By SEAN DELANEY**  
*Source Staff Writer*

Family and friends of former Shelby Township Fire Chief Gene Shepherd gathered June 1 to celebrate the official opening of the park that bears his name.

“Dedicating this park to Chief Gene Shepherd is a perfect tribute to a great man and leader from our community who was, first and foremost, a tremendous friend, father and husband to his beloved wife,” said Shelby

Township Supervisor Richard Stathakis.

“Gene was an amazing asset to our community in more ways than we could possibly list. In working with and becoming friends with him, I saw firsthand the way he built relationships, and how he held a deep respect for everyone who came in contact with him, and an appreciation for their opinions and abilities.”

A 25-year veteran of the Shelby Township Fire De-



SOURCE PHOTO/SEAN DELANEY

Family and friends of former Shelby Township Fire Chief Gene Shepherd gathered June 1 to celebrate the official opening of the park that bears his name.

# Parks

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partment, Shepherd served as its chief for three years before losing his battle with cancer in May 2012.

"Gene didn't win his battle with cancer, but he won the war," said Lee Ann Shepherd, who attended the June 1 ceremony honoring her late husband's memory.

"I'm sure from time to time, especially this week, God and Gene have conversations, and one of those conversations was about the opening of this park," she said. "(Gene) would say 'June 1 is the opening of my park, Lord, so please let it be a nice day.' He did that for us."

The park is located on the site of the former Soccer City complex near 23 Mile and

Dequindre roads. It features a covered pavilion, tennis and sand volleyball courts, a bocce ball and horseshoe pit, a soccer field and indoor restrooms.

"The opening of this park is a tremendous compliment to the person Gene was," said Shelby Township Fire Chief Jim Swinkowski. "He was a family man, a good friend and a great leader. We all feel the same about Gene, and there's no better way to honor a person like Gene than to have a family-friendly park. To have a beautiful day like this, with all of his family and co-workers here, it's a great tribute to Gene and the person he was."

Prior to being named in honor of the late fire chief, the former Soccer City site had been on the township's radar for some time.

Under former Supervisor

Ralph Maccarone, the township agreed to lease the land and the right to operate a soccer complex for 25 years to Soccer City. In exchange, Soccer City promised to invest \$3.5 million to improve the land. But less than a year after the deal was approved by the Board of Trustees, problems surfaced.

Township officials accused Soccer City of violating provisions of the agreement and for damaging wetlands at the site. By 2008, the agreement was terminated.

Eventually, the township paid Soccer City \$1 million, in part as reimbursement for improvements to the property, and the wetlands issues were resolved with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

Once the legal hurdles were removed, township of-

ficials renamed the property to honor the former fire chief and committed up to \$450,000 to renovate the property into a park.

"Often in politics we say victory has many fathers, and this is actually one of those situations where it's true," said Treasurer Michael Flynn, who also serves as the board's liaison to the township's Parks and Recreation Committee. "This has really been a team effort from the very beginning."

Lee Ann Shepherd thanked township officials, committee members and residents for honoring her husband and dedicating the park to his memory.

"Thank you again, everyone, for making Chief Gene Shepherd Park something our family can be proud of the rest of our lives," she said.