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Plaza could 'transform west Olympia'

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OLYMPIA - A public plaza with an amphitheater, an environmental learning center, a bell tower and a dog park could be coming to the city's west side. A group of business and community leaders announced Tuesday that it has a contract on a piece of property for that purpose on the north side of Harrison Avenue, just west of Cooper Point Road.

The 27-acre site was identified by the West Olympia Community Visioning Group, a nonprofit governed by a board of 15 people. The group has been working for more than two years to find a property and design the park, which is estimated to cost more than \$3 million.

"We're looking at this as an opportunity for something that I think will just transform west Olympia," said Phil Schulte, a board member for the group, to a small gathering at the West Olympia Rotary.

Board member Jim Randall said the idea behind the plaza is that west Olympia has businesses and housing, but "it was lacking sort of a community center," he said.

The Olympia City Council backed the plaza idea as its eighth-biggest priority last year. It dedicated \$20,000 to the project, according to the visioning group. The board raised an additional \$10,000.

That was Phase 1. Now the group is planning to raise \$300,000 to complete the purchase of the land. Jim Morris, a board member and local developer, said an anonymous donor has pledged \$25,000 in matching money.

In Phase 3, the group will seek \$3 million in city, state and federal funding to complete the project.

The 27-acre property is wooded, and about 19 acres are developable, said Janet JansenKnoblach, a board member for the community group. It's within walking distance of five schools.

A conceptual drawing shows a plaza on the front of the property that is big enough to fit Sylvester Park, Knoblach said. Behind that would be an amphitheater with a terraced, grass seating area that Knoblach said could hold several hundred people for outdoor events, such as concerts. A walking path would connect the property to the adjacent Grass Lake Refuge, where another trail system is planned.

Also planned is a 25,000-square-foot building for community meetings, with an environmental learning center and a library kiosk.

Group members had considered building a space for a new west side branch of the Timberland Regional Library. But that is considered unlikely after voters turned down a tax increase in 2008 for library operations.

Knoblach said the building would be suitable for a library in the future.

The features of the plaza are just a proposal, emphasized Knoblach, a partner with Morton Safford James III AIA Architects Inc. P.S. The firm she is a part of donated its design services.

Morris said the plaza, once built, could be maintained by the city as a park or the nonprofit could continue to run it. Seth Winterhalter, another board member, said revenue from sources such as concert tickets and educational programs could pay for it.

Olympia Councilman Craig Ottavelli, who helped form the visioning group and kick off the project, was pleased with the development.

“This project was identified as a council goal in 2009, and it remains visible in the parks plan update that we’re working on now,” he said.