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## Group's vision for plaza a good start for west-side property

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After more than two years of work, a group of local business and community leaders have announced plans to purchase 27 acres on Olympia's west side to be used as a community gathering place.

The West Olympia Community Visioning Group, a local nonprofit, envisions a public plaza with an amphitheater, an environmental learning center, a bell tower and a dog park – within walking distance of five schools. The property is located on the north side of Harrison Avenue, just west of Cooper Point Road.

It's a grand vision and would be an incredible community asset. What's imperative is that a realistic financing plan be put together that governs not just the property acquisition and development, but also the long-term maintenance of the site, which may end up in city ownership. Taxpayers, too, must have a voice in shaping the future of this exciting proposal.

The project has been on the city's "to-do" list for a couple of years. Business leaders and community activists have long argued that west Olympia needs a place for neighbors to come together and share good times – a west side focal point much as downtown Olympia is a gathering place for the broader community.

Olympia Councilman Craig Ottavelli has been a prime mover of the west-side proposal and got the project listed on the council's list of goals for 2009. He served as vice president of the visioning group.

At the outset, Ottavelli said the new public plaza should be anchored by a new branch of the Timberland Regional Library network. There is general agreement that the city's one and only public library on Eighth Avenue in downtown Olympia is undersized and that a second Olympia library is needed. There has been considerable community debate over the proper location of a new branch library, with a strong contingent pushing the west side option.

The visioning group, led by a 15-member board of directors, has been looking for an ideal location for the library and other amenities. In February 2009, the group announced its hope to lock up the west-side location. It proved to be bad timing.

The announcement came at the exact time voters were soundly rejecting a ballot proposition to increase property taxes to maintain library services. The library director and trustees announced a series of cutbacks to balance the budget without new revenue – staff reductions, cuts in services to patrons, reduced hours of operations and imposition of a new library fine, among them.

So how – in the face of those cutbacks – could the Olympia visioning group even consider building and operating a new library?

The answer lies in the manner in which library buildings and library services are paid for. While the Timberland Regional Library District operates libraries in five counties, the buildings are mostly built and owned by city governments. So the city of Olympia could build a library on its own – separate from the regional library system.

But given the financial condition of the city, plans for a second library on the west side have been put on hold. That leaves the visioning group with a somewhat scaled-back vision.

The 27-acre property is wooded, and about 19 acres are developable, said Janet Jansen Knoblach, a board member for the community group.

The conceptual drawing shows a plaza on the front of the property that is big enough to fit Sylvester Park. Adjacent to 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. Knoblach said the building would be suitable for a library in the future.

After construction, the site could be operated by the city, or a nonprofit.

The City Council dedicated \$20,000 to the project and the visioning group raised another \$10,000, to get the project moving forward. The next step is to raise \$300,000 to complete the purchase of the property. In the final phase, \$3 million would have to come from city, state and federal funding sources to complete the project.

That's a serious amount of money and that's why it's necessary that a realistic financing plan be developed. City officials have said renovation of the Percival Landing boardwalk is a top priority, so there's a real question where the dollars for the west side development will come from.

At some point – soon – city residents must be consulted and asked for their ideas and vision for the west-side property. Do they even support the plan or believe other projects should take priority. Proponents also must answer community concerns about the destruction of wildlife habitat and how taxpayers are going to be able to pay additional maintenance costs.

Development of this plan will be a long process, but the West Olympia Community Visioning Group is off to a good start.