

# Olympia to buy 24 acres for park

## West Side: Council votes 4-3 to spend \$300,000; nonprofit would develop it

MATT BATCHELDOR; Staff writer | • Published July 27, 2011

OLYMPIA – The Olympia City Council has approved spending \$300,000 to buy 24 acres on Harrison Avenue just west of Cooper Point Road for a new park tentatively called West Side Plaza.

In addition to a public plaza, plans for the site include an amphitheater, educational center, trail, bell tower and a dog park. But the plans aren't set in stone; the city is working on a public process for the community to suggest what will go on the land.

"We're really excited about it," said Phil Schulte, vice president of the West Olympia Community Visioning Group. "We think it could be one of the most significant changes on the west side in a decade at least."

The purchase is unusual; the property was secured under contract about two years ago by the nonprofit West Olympia Community Visioning Group (CVG), and the city plans to lease the land to the group to build out the site.

The City Council voted 4-3 to authorize the purchase at its July 19 meeting after about two hours of discussion. Voting for were Councilman Craig Ottavelli, who made the motion to approve, Councilwoman Rhenda Strub, Councilwoman Karen Rogers and Mayor Doug Mah. Voting against were council members Stephen Buxbaum, Steve Langer and Jeannine Roe, who expressed concerns about the process.

To pay for it, the council voted unanimously to spend \$189,000 in unallocated Parks Open Space Impact Fees and \$111,000 from unallocated interest earnings on the city's 2 percent tax on private utilities.

Next, City Manager Steve Hall will close on the property from its current owner, the Thomas P. Youell Marital Trust. The council's vote also requires the city to begin negotiating a lease with the CVG. If it can't reach agreement within a year of the property's purchase, the agreement allows the CVG a 30-month period to buy the property from the city.

In turn, the CVG plans to raise money to build out the park, combining it with public money in undetermined amounts.

Some residents at last week's council meeting expressed concern that the project circumvented the regular public process, and were concerned the agreement with CVG gave the group too much influence on the park. Their comments and others at the meeting were taken from a city video.

"There has been no City Council committee referral, no advisory committee referral activity or recommendation, no public process worthy of the name," said Olympia resident Joe Ford. "The memorandum of understanding states that the CVG has conducted its own public process. This is not a public process; this is a private process."

In an interview, CVG Secretary Jim Randall said he didn't think the proposal would be controversial after the public knew more about it.

"If anything I think that the one thing has been stunning to me is that there is anything controversial about it," he said. "It's pretty innocuous. ... There's nothing really contentious in its nature."

### COMMUNITY GROUP

The West Olympia Community Visioning Group has been discussing the plaza plan since at least 2008.

"The core vision ... started with the idea that west Olympia really sort of lacks soul, doesn't really have a heart," Randall said at the meeting. "I mean, it's a very predominantly commercial area."

Schulte said in an interview that the group is made up of about 10 people who are committed to the west side, including business owners and residents. It initially planned to include a branch of the Timberland Regional Library in the plaza, but abandoned that idea after a 2008 library levy failed.

The group scouted out sites for a project, then got a contract on the land on Harrison Avenue in February 2009, Schulte said. The City Council also added West Bay Plaza to its list of 2009 priorities.

The CVG had planned to buy the property itself but couldn't raise enough money, said Hall, the city manager, in an interview. Instead, the group plans to use its money to develop the parcel, he said. About \$50,000 has been raised in cash and pledges, Randall said.

About nine months ago, the CVG began negotiating with the city about buying the property, according to CVG members.

"It really is a nice piece of property ... at a really favorable price," Hall said in an interview. "I think everybody involved wants to see this become a benefit for the community."

Other west side community members also expressed support for the project.

"We've supported the CVG since the beginning of this project," said Bob Jones, president of the Goldcrest Neighborhood Association, at the council meeting.

#### SOME CRITICISM

But some concerns have been raised – both by council members and residents – about the unusual nature of the transaction. The CVG picked the site, signed the contract and has developed a plan for the site and helped develop a plan for the city to lease the site back to the group.

"The CVG holds the cards in this arrangement," said Rachel Newman of Olympia. She also said there's a perception of a conflict of interest for Councilman Ottavelli, who was once on the board of the CVG before resigning in 2009. Ottavelli also championed the project and proposed that it be placed on the council's 2009 priorities.

Ottavelli said in the meeting that he resigned from the board in August 2009 after the group started talking about working with the city on the project. In an interview, he said his role lately has been as a liaison between the group and the council.

Newman said the topic of the west side plaza hasn't come up during city comprehensive plan meetings. She also questioned the purchase price. But Randall said that it was a "terrific deal" and that an independent appraisal of the property the city commissioned valued the property at \$1.4 million.

Resident Zena Hartung said the topic was "somehow jumping the queue." It wasn't in the city's 2011 parks work plan and that the Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee hadn't reviewed it, she said.

Hall admitted during the meeting that "we have not gone through a full public vetting of what the partnership should look like."

But West Side Plaza is in the city's parks plan, updated last year. It says the city should pursue a public-private partnership to make it happen, even though a funding source had not then been identified.

Council members narrowly approved the transaction on a 4-3 vote.

Buxbaum expressed concerns that there hasn't been enough public process and he needed a bit more time.

Matt Batcheldor: 360-704-6869 [mbatcheldor@theolympian.com](mailto:mbatcheldor@theolympian.com)

Read more: <http://www.theolympian.com/2011/07/27/1739014/olympia-to-buy-24-acres-for-park.html#ixzz1WjpQTcLv>