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EDITOR'S PICK

Questions persist about Elks Club purchase

By David Delcore Staff Writer

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The buildings and grounds of the former Montpelier Elks Club as seen in an aerial view Thursday.

Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff Photo

MONTPELIER — At least one of the four bond issues that will appear on next Tuesday's ballot didn't provoke any pushback during Wednesday night's public hearing. However, the other three proposals prompted a mix of questions and concerns with most predictably focused on the city's plans to purchase the 138-acre property that was the decades-long home of the now-dissolved Montpelier Elks Club.

It's why City Manager Bill Fraser came armed with a second "expanded" PowerPoint presentation focused exclusively on the proposed acquisition of the former Elks Club property — 10-hole golf course and all — and why Mayor Anne Watson suggested it would be a good idea to share it before she invited comments from the public.



Fraser did — attempting to address many of the questions that have been raised in person, in print and on social media since city councilors agreed to ask voters to approve a \$2 million bond issue that, he said, would cover most, but not all, of the projected cost of acquiring the property if it is approved next Tuesday.

According to Fraser, an independent appraisal of the land and building is underway and a purchase and sales agreement has been proposed, but, to his knowledge, not yet signed by Steve Ribolini who bought the property for roughly \$1.3 million when he became the Elks Club's landlord in 2016.

That landlord-tenant relationship ended when the club temporarily relocated and subsequently voted to surrender its 153-year-old charter late last year.

Though the appraisal hasn't been completed, Fraser predicted the cost of the property would probably be closer to \$3 million. If approved by voters next week, he said, the \$2 million bond would be supplemented with much, if not most, of the roughly \$1 million the city has in a recreation reserve fund.

Fraser kicked off his presentation by acknowledging what was the most frequently mentioned knock involving the proposal — the absence of a defined plan and a detailed analysis of the property to determine its potential.

“This is definitely not a typical municipal project,” he said, suggesting he understood the reluctance of those hungry for information that doesn’t yet exist and wary of supporting the proposal in its absence.

“I get that,” he said, suggesting acquiring the property would give the city time to evaluate how best to use both the open land and the existing building as part of a robust public process.



While details were in short supply, Fraser said incorporating a mix of housing — at least some of it affordable — has been discussed and outdoor and indoor recreation could easily be accommodated. The latter, he said, would likely require additional future investment, but the site is superior to either of the options — one on Barre Street and the other by the municipal swimming pool — that have been evaluated in recent years.

“We see it as a large opportunity to meet a lot of city needs,” he said, adding: “It’s a big space.”

While “walk-ability” has been cited as a concern given the property’s comparatively remote location, Fraser noted the recently extended bike path runs by the base of the hill that leads up to the property and could be extended up Country Club Road. The site already has ample parking and could accommodate a variety of uses over time.

Fraser sought to explain the urgency behind what several councilors and a couple of residents characterized as “a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“Property values are increasing quickly and properties of this size do not often become available,” he said.

Residents Didi Brush and Lisa Moody were among those who said the absence of detailed information was problematic.

“So many questions are unanswered,” Brush said. “People really, really are yearning for more concrete, specific answers.”

Moody agreed.

“It just seems cart before the horse to me,” she said when told the city hadn’t evaluated the development potential of the property or assessed environmental impacts associated with still ill-defined plans.

Stephen Whitaker, who hopes to oust Watson in next week’s mayoral race, described the proposal as “a case study in the lack of due diligence” and suggested the city ought to obtain a right of first refusal to buy time to evaluate the property and develop a more detailed proposal.

“We discussed that possibility (with Ribolini) and that’s not where we ended up,” Fraser said.

While most residents who spoke on the proposal said they were left with unanswered questions, a couple, including Vicki Lane, said she hoped city voters would take a leap of faith.

The council threw its collective support behind the proposed property acquisition they argued would put the city in the drivers seat with respect to how, where and for whom it is developed.

“If we don’t do this now and this parcel is sold to someone else and we lose control over what happens (with) the land future generations will rightly criticize us for letting this opportunity go,” Councilor Jack McCullough said, expressing a sentiment that was echoed by several other members.

While the bond to buy the Elks Club property generated the most discussion, the council heard concerns about the \$600,000 expense to complete construction of Confluence Park that is part of a separately warned \$1.8 million package of “infrastructure” projects, as well as the \$16.4 million bond that, if approved, will finance the second phase of an upgrade to the city’s water resource recovery facility.

On a night when residents seemed satisfied with the municipal budget proposal and some argued more should be spent on upgrading city streets, the only bond issue that wasn't questioned is the one that will finance the \$7.2 million reconstruction of East State Street.

david.delcore @timesargus.com

david.delcore@timesargus.com

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