

JOURNAL OF COMMISSION WORK SESSION
January 18, 2011

City Commission Work Session

Mayor Winters presiding

CALL TO ORDER: 6:00 p.m.

ROLL CALL: City Commissioners present: Michael J. Winters, Bill Bronson, Fred Burow, Mary Jolley, and Robert Jones. Also present were the City Manager, Deputy City Manager, Directors of Library, Park and Recreation, Planning and Community Development, Public Works, Acting Director of Fiscal Services, Executive Director of the Housing Authority, Fire Chief, Police Chief, and the Administrative Secretary.

1. WEST BANK PARK MASTER PLAN UPDATE

Park and Recreation Director Marty Basta reported West Bank Park is a lineal 34-acre park that has about 8,600 feet of riverfront, generally located between the Central Avenue West Bridge and the 10th Street Bridge, along the west bank of the Missouri River. The Park has the potential to be developed into one of the premier municipal parks in the State of Montana. The Park has historic ties to the Lewis and Clark Exploration, and also the unique characteristic of being in an urban setting with natural riparian vegetation and wildlife. The Park is a place to enjoy views across the Missouri River while interacting with nature in the middle of the city.

Mr. Basta reported that on March 20, 2007 the City Commission passed Ordinance 2967, establishing the Great Falls West Bank Urban Renewal Plan, including a Tax Increment Financing provision that included West Bank Park. The Plan states that the Missouri River and associated West Bank Park are the defining features of the West Bank Urban Renewal District. On May 4, 2010, the City Commission approved a professional services contract with CTA Architects Engineers in the amount of \$58,000 to update the West Bank Park Master Plan. The Master Plan seeks to discover a balance between maintaining a sense of place and seclusion, while promoting compatible uses for increasing the value of the Park in the overall park system.

Mr. Basta reported that the Master Plan Steering Committee was formed in June, and includes representatives from Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the Audubon Society, City and County officials, neighborhood council members, and the River's Edge Trail. Steering Committee members include Brant Birkeland, Planning and Community Development Department; Rodney Caldwell, PPL; Lori Fay, NC 3; Phyllis Hemstad, NC 2; Beth Hill, Audubon Society; Matt Marcinek, FWP; Jim Rearden, Public Works Department; Giles Salyer, Park and Recreation Department; Jane Weber, Cascade County Commissioner; and, Doug Wicks, River's Edge Trail.

Mr. Basta noted that the planning process for the Master Plan was developed with a strong sense of importance of public involvement. The process has been guided by the Steering Committee and has included a town hall meeting, a two-day design charrette, as well as an extensive on-line survey. A total of 367 surveys were completed and submitted. The Plan emphasizes connectivity to adjacent residential neighborhoods, while capitalizing on the redeveloped

commercial users. Some of the elements recommended in the Master Plan include an amphitheatre, improved trails, improved site amenities, a natural playground for children, and a beach volleyball court for young adults. Phase One of the Plan would provide for the basic park infrastructure including roadways, parking, signage, irrigation, and landscaping. Some of the other amenities would be provided in subsequent phases.

Mr. Basta introduced West Bank Park Master Plan Project Manager Wayne Freeman, CTA Architects Engineers, who has designed or developed plans for more than 100 park and recreation projects worldwide over a 25-year career. Mr. Freeman has raised more than \$50 million in private and public funds for park and open space projects in the last ten years through grants and other funding mechanisms.

Mr. Freeman provided a slide show presentation on the West Bank Park Master Plan. He reported that the project began in June, 2010, and from the start the public participation process was geared as very important to the city. As part of the contractual arrangements, Mr. Freeman stated the focus has been on creating public participation through programming meetings and design charrettes. Public meetings for the design charrette and programming phases of gathering information, trying to garner local support, local understanding, and local input, were very important.

Mr. Freeman reported the contractual arrangements also included developing a survey. The survey was an on-line instrument that garnered about 367 responses that helped gauge what was heard during the design charrette process. The overall comment was that folks wanted the Park to remain somewhat similar to what it is today – a passive park, predominantly focused on the trail system, where people can picnic with their children and get next to the river.

Mr. Freeman explained that a lot of background information was reviewed including a 1995 Parks Master Plan; the 2002 Growth Policy; the 2004 Missouri River Corridor Plan; the 2004 Land & Water Assessment Master Plan; the 2007 West Bank Urban Renewal Plan; the 2009 Great Falls Transportation Plan; and current Great Falls zoning.

After developing parks and recreational systems across the United States and distant lands, Mr. Freeman is convinced the quote “the best communities have the best parks” is a fact. Strong park systems are a great selling point for communities that are progressive and want to entertain growth with local neighborhood communities. He noted that Sacajawea Island, a more natural area, is highly visible from both the east and the west, and light industrial and commercial development that surrounds the Park is not uncommon in a community with a riverfront park.

Mr. Freeman received many comments indicating there are three separate zones within the long, linear park, and there are three distinct phases within the Master Plan. The northern zone is a passive area, the middle is a transitional area, and the southern zone is a more active area.

The northern, Sacajawea Island area development strategies include enhancing the current roadway system; expanding some of the parking areas; improving the cul-de-sac areas; providing for a new vault-type restroom facility; enhancing the pavilion; and including a sand volleyball court, all surrounded by an enhanced, central corridor walkway trail. The other portion of the

northern zone would include irrigating and defining a green space and providing additional trees along the edge of the railroad.

Phase one of the middle, transitional section includes enhancing the amount of landscaping and trees, predominantly to buffer the railroad corridor and industrial edge, keeping the trail link and providing landscape irrigation.

Most of the amenities and elements will occur in the southern, active zone. The existing mound, amphitheatre area will be promoted and enhanced in the Master Plan. The amphitheatre is a natural formed area with large boulders that define the seating areas. In the future phase, earthen mounds will become a natural playground area, and trees will be planted along the edge of the railroad. Also planned is a new restroom with flushable toilets that can be used for events with larger crowds. A stage that would seat 400-600 people is promoted within the amphitheatre area with tension-fabric canopy structures. Expansion areas would be available on the grassy areas.

The entry for the pavilion associated with the drop-off zone would have asphalt surfacing and curbing around the cul-de-sac, but minimal parking. Though parking was discussed at length, the decision was made to minimize parking and focus on handicapped parking and a small amount of day-to-day parking. Mr. Freeman emphasized it would not be possible to provide enough parking in that park for a major event. A boat ramp is included in the southern zone and a non-motorized boat launch is also proposed. A drop-off zone associated with that boat ramp could double as a parking area for event buses.

Mr. Freeman noted the sidewalk system is being expanded in the area, linking the existing trail connection under the First Avenue Bridge. Throughout the entire length of the park, a 10-foot wide trail system linking south to north is being promoted.

Mr. Freeman reported that Phase 1 of the project is approximately \$2 million and includes the initial phase of construction. An irrigation system comparable to golf course irrigation is proposed. Amenities associated with the amphitheatre include promenade paving, earthwork, a lighting and sound system, and sculpting about 300 boulders.

Mr. Freeman showed slides of a shelter area; a native playground area with earthen mounds; a maze and swing sets for children; and an aerial image of the amphitheatre, pavilion, and restrooms. The second phase includes a concrete walkway with bench seating set out into the river giving the feeling of being on the water.

Mr. Freeman identified potential sources of state, federal and private grants to help match and fund the project. He noted that he will also assist with writing and trying to secure at least two grants as examples.

Commissioner Jolley questioned the pavilion. Mr. Freeman stated the northern pavilion is a fairly large shelter that would hold four picnic tables. Mr. Basta commented that pavilion is located near the amphitheatre for use with events. Mayor Winters noted that he liked the potential water walkway.

Commissioner Jolley asked the number of people who could be seated comfortably in the grassy area by the amphitheatre. Mr. Freeman responded the amphitheatre seats approximately 200; with the spillover onto the grassy area, he believes 400-500 could be seated comfortably. Mayor Winters questioned if skateboarders and inline skaters would be able to use the amphitheatre. Mr. Freeman responded the stairway would be the biggest detractor and mechanisms can be included for that purpose when defining the details of the construction phase.

Commissioner Bronson questioned the long term maintenance expenses. Mr. Basta responded that was one of the reasons Giles Salyer, Forestry Supervisor, was on the Steering Committee. He had input throughout the process to try to keep those expenses to a minimum. Mr. Basta stated he did not currently know the costs that would be involved. Mr. Freeman commented that mowing would be a large expense.

Mike Witsoe, address not stated, questioned if the area would be lighted. Mr. Freeman responded the amphitheatre is programmed to have more lighting than the rest of the park. The stairway would be lighted, and a lighting system would be available for an event. He believes there are only ten light fixtures planned for the entire length of the primary trail. The goal of the Steering Committee was to focus towards a dark sky initiative; West Bank Park is a dawn to dusk park.

Brett Doney, address not stated, commented that the plan is fantastic and believes there is the potential for service clubs to adopt portions of the Park, do fundraising and provide sweat equity. The Park will be a great marketing tool to attract developers.

Cindy Baker, address not stated, questioned if the fabric covered canopy will stand up to the wind. Mr. Freeman responded he has not had one blow over. Ms. Baker also questioned the wisdom of allowing kayakers and canoers put in so close to a dam. Mayor Winters noted the rowing club has been doing that for years. Commissioner Bronson commented those folks know how far they can go.

Stuart Lewin, address not stated, believes that cars and roads should not be allowed in the area. He expressed concern that the development on the other side of the railroad tracks has not been considered to determine parking and how people will access a more natural park. Also, the pollution problems have not been solved.

Mayor Winters commented that the character of many communities is summarized in its parks. He believes the area is a beautiful place for a park that could be well used and an attraction for people coming into the area.

Mr. Witsoe questioned if there is a contingency plan for the area beyond the grass. Mr. Basta responded the railroad tracks are the barrier line. Mr. Freeman noted there is a pedestrian link under the railroad track in future phases.

Commissioner Bronson believes the county owns the land under Montana Specialty Mills. Once Montana Specialty Mills moves, the county will decide future development plans. Cascade County Commissioner Jane Weber agreed. She added the West Bank Park planning process has

had excellent community involvement, resulting in a great compromise.

Richard Ecke, address not stated, questioned if the irrigation system will be sand proof. Mr. Basta responded City water will be used.

Mr. Witsoe asked about gophers and geese. He also questioned if Search and Rescue will be called when canoers and kayakers get too close to the dam; who will have the liability; and if electric motors will be allowed. Mr. Basta responded the boat launch is for non-motorized boats. He added there is a non-motorized boat launch upstream about five miles on the Sun River and this boat launch could be a point of disembarkment.

Mayor Winters noted there is also a canoe launch across from this boat launch. Mr. Basta agreed and added that Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and Search and Rescue are interested in this boat launch.

Mr. Basta reported receiving \$10,000 cash donations for developing the Park, and there is a pending grant with PPL Montana. If the City Commission adopts the West Bank Park Master Plan, some of the activities can begin in the spring. When people start seeing things happen at the Park, he believes more people will be interested in assisting with the development of the Park.

Commissioner Bronson asked if the Master Plan will need a public hearing. Mr. Basta responded that is correct.

ADJOURN

There being no further discussion, Mayor Winters adjourned the work session of January 18, 2011, at 6:40 p.m.