

KESEY SQUARE DECISION: WHAT'S THE BIG RUSH?

Slow down. That's the message citizens of Eugene are emailing to City Manager Jon Ruiz, Mayor Kitty Piercy and the Eugene City Council about Kesey Square and its potential development into an apartment building by a local group, which could happen as soon as this spring.

Jan. 15 was the deadline for submission of RFEIs (requests for expression of interest) for Kesey Square.

"I am reading with some alarm the fast pace of decision-making regarding the future of Kesey Square. The renewal of downtown Eugene continues and it seems prudent to take time addressing the long-term use of Kesey Square," wrote Libby Unthank Tower to Ruiz, Piercy and the council Jan. 5.

Tower is the new chair of the Oregon Arts Commission as well as the former manager for marketing and public relations for the city's Cultural Services department.

The email continues: "Many of us have returned from the holiday break and Jan. 15 provides a very short window to address 'alternative expressions of interest' for this space. And, it appears from the outside that a 'deal has been in the works' with the proposed developers for some time."

This letter is not unique: The Mayor, City Manager and City Council inbox, which is open to public records scrutiny, has been flooded during the past month with emails discouraging the sale of Kesey Square, including several requesting that the city of Eugene delay the Jan. 15 RFEI deadline.

The city of Eugene announced a call for RFEIs on Nov. 30, 2015, in which it sought "letters of interest and conceptual development proposals from qualified development teams or an individual for the purchase/lease and redevelopment of the Broadway and Willamette parcel."

Some emails pointed out that the city announced the RFEI request on Nov. 30, only allotting five weeks over the holidays for interested parties to submit ideas to the city. The development group behind the proposal to build apartments on Kesey Square — Rowell Brokaw Architects, business owner Kaz Oveissi, developer consultant Mark Miksis and advising developers Harris Hoffman and Hugh Prichard — has been working on its proposal for two years.

Ruiz tells *EW* he decided to issue the RFEI. The city's Communications Relations Director Jan Bohman says Ruiz decided to issue the RFEI after "receiving feedback from the City Council."

Yet at least two councilors were unaware of where the RFEI came from. Councilors Betty Taylor and George Brown say they were taken by surprise by the city manager's decision to issue an RFEI for Kesey Square.

On Dec. 11, Taylor wrote an email to Ruiz asking, "Who decided to issue an RFEI?" She concludes by stating: "I would like to know what tentative agreement has been made with the prospective developers and how long it has been in progress."

At a Jan. 11 council work session, Taylor asked the city manager why the deadline for the RFEI was

so early. Ruiz did not respond to this question.

"I can't believe we would consider selling it," Brown told *EW* at the council work session. "It's not on the surplus property list."

Brown adds, "Evidently it's within the city manager's purview." Brown notes that in his seven years on council he's never seen a request for an RFEI.

In spite of the five-week deadline, proposals have been submitted to the city, including one from Ali Emami, the business owner who also owns the two buildings that flank Kesey Square (housing Voodoo Doughnut and Northwest Persian Rugs). His proposal offers two options: putting apartments above his own buildings and keeping Kesey Square public or entering into a public-private partnership with the city to

open up the city-owned walls of the square to make it more user-friendly.

The City Council will consider options for the square in February. A "Save Kesey Square" rally has been planned for 6:30 pm Monday, Jan. 25, at the Wayne Morse Free Speech Plaza in front of Harris Hall (125 E. 8th Ave.), where a 7 pm council meeting is scheduled; as of press time, 264 people are attending the rally, according to the event's Facebook page. — *Alex V. Cipolle*

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— LIBBY UNTHANK TOWER



PHOTO: ALI EMAMI