

RIVERFRONT: Study revealed Pendleton could support 90 more for-sale units

Continued from 1A

as neighborhood children build tree forts, evidenced by wood planks nailed to various trunks.

When the Pendleton Planning Commission announced in January it was holding a public hearing on a zoning procedure that could change the nature of the land, Peg Willis went to voice her opposition.

The city had identified a more than four-acre parcel by the river it owned through the Pendleton Development Commission as a prime piece of property to sell to a potential housing developer.

The city requested that the commission approve division of the parcel, cleaving off most of the southern portion that lies in the flood plain to remain undeveloped. The remaining 0.58-acre chunk, which is more accessible to utilities and Seventh Street, would be made available for purchase and building.

Peg Willis was the only person to speak against the move during the commission's public testimony period, not only arguing her case from a preservationist standpoint, but also expressing her concerns that a new housing development would clog on-street parking as well as the property's proximity to the 100-year flood line.

The commission listened to the testimony but unanimously voted to approve the division of the parcel.

After all of the research and preparation, Peg Willis called the commission's decision "disheartening," and she decided against appealing the decision to the city council because she wasn't a "political person."

But neither Peg Willis nor her husband like the thought of a housing project down the slope from their home any more than they did six months ago.

The couple described how central Pendleton sits in a geographical hole surrounded by inclines and hills. They much preferred one of the city's other expansion initiatives — replacing the Eighth Street Bridge — because it opened up the possibility of providing housing growth on the northern edge of town rather than continuing to pack people in the city's interior.

"Instead of this hole, look out at the periphery of the town," Jim Willis said.

And while they also made the point that preserving that section of the river is aesthetically important to the community, especially those who



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

No current plans are on the books for this section of land on the north bank of the Umatilla River in Pendleton.

walk the Pendleton River Parkway on the south side of the Umatilla, the heart of the Willises' argument is a personal one.

"(This is) not for humanity, because we don't know humanity, but for our kids," Peg Willis said.

The need for housing

The Willises were eventually able to capture the attention of Mayor John Turner, who is well acquainted with the city's housing issues as both a politician and a citizen.

Turner has chaired two separate housing study committees for the city, and after he was sworn in as mayor in January, he assumed the chairmanship for the Housing and Neighborhood Improvement Committee. Turner met with them, and although both sides described the meeting as cordial, neither the mayor nor the North Hill couple seemed swayed after it concluded.

Although he understood where the Willises were coming from, Turner said land that can be developed for housing is a rare commodity in Pendleton, especially a piece of land in close proximity to city utilities.

Turner said that if the city nixed housing developments because of neighboring opposition, nothing would ever get done. No one wants something built next door.

Given the recent history of large-scale housing development in Pendleton, Turner's argument holds some weight.

The Pendleton Heights subdivision on Tutuilla Road endured years of community criticism, and that was before the developer decided to make the final phase a 100-unit apartment complex instead of 24 townhouses.

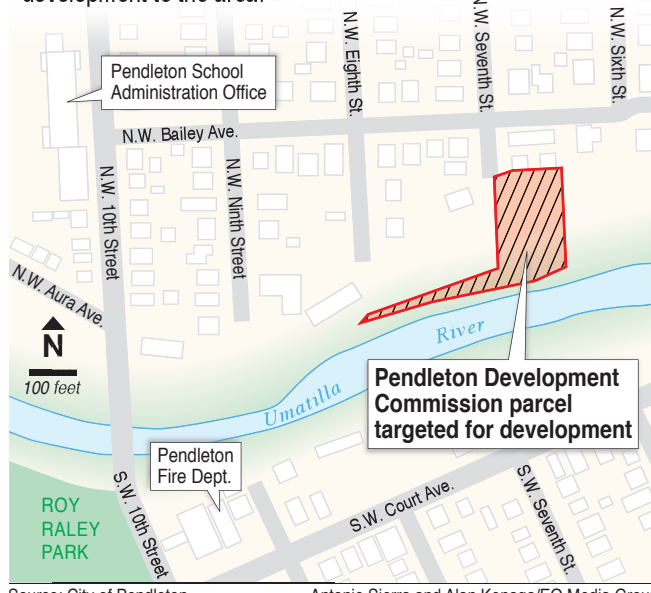
While it never came to fruition, a housing developer's plan to build an apartment complex on an old gun range near Blue Mountain Community College also drew opposition from nearby residents in 2014.

Neighborhood discomfort with new housing developments butts up against the city's goals to provide more housing.

The most recent housing study the city commissioned revealed that the Pendleton market could support 125 more rental units and 90 for-sale

Riverfront land up for development

The City of Pendleton recently divided a parcel of land it owns north of the Umatilla River in anticipation of attracting a housing development to the area.



Source: City of Pendleton Antonio Sierra and Alan Kenaga/EO Media Group

units. City officials believe that more housing could make commuters buy and live in Pendleton, and make the city a more attractive destination for potential employers.

Turner said the city also faces pressure from constituents who feel the city needs to operate more effi-

ciently, which includes offloading publicly owned land unused by the city.

Before the meeting ended, Turner said the city could sell the Willises the land, although he didn't quote them a price.

Peg and Jim remain interested in Turner's offer and have contemplated buying riverfront land near their house before.

Two large parcels of land near the river, extending from south of Northwest Seventh Street to just past the area behind Northwest Eighth Street, used to be owned by a Pendleton man named Stan Simons.

The Willises approached him about buying the land, but he was interested in developing it and declined their offer.

When Stan Simons died in 2011, ownership of the land was transferred to Stansbrood LLC, a reference to his children and a pheasant breeding hobby.

Stansbrood is owned by Tim Simons, the Pendleton community development director and city engineer, and his two siblings.

Tim Simons said Peg Willis also approached him about buying the land, but discussions haven't advanced past an initial inquiry.

Having talked about the still-undeveloped land with his siblings, Tim Simons said he wouldn't think about developing the land until after he retires, when he would have more time and it would be less of a conflict of interest. He said Stansbrood is open to selling the land, but isn't actively soliciting a buyer.

The city has no immediate plans to develop their land either, with John Turner unaware of any recent interest from a housing developer.

While a housing development isn't imminent, both Peg and Jim Willis plan to challenge the city any way they can if plans for condos or townhouses start to materialize.

Contact Antonio Sierra at asierra@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0836.




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