HEPPNER 50¢
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Planning commission says no to lot division

No dog park for Willow View Drive

By David Sykes

The Heppner city Planning Commission last Monday turned down a request from city manager Kraig Cutsforth to partition a county-owned lot on Willow View Drive in preparation for turning the property into a city dog park. Twenty-eight people signed a petition against the partition and about a dozen came to the public hearing. No one spoke in favor of the proposal.

"As residents and property owners in this neighborhood we object to this proposal to partition this property as it would violate the spirit and intent of the original agreement with the county for the use of this property," the petition said. Other residents who testified in person said they did not want the lot divided, saying it may open up the area for other development unfavorable to the neighborhood.

The reason for the partition request and dog park proposal can be traced back to other property located at the former Kinzua Mill site. The sheriff's office has been leasing a building on the Port of Morrow owned site for quite some time, using it for emergency services equipment and storage. The sheriff's office uses a metal building on the property to park vehicles and other uses. As part of its lease with the port, the county has an agreement that if the property were to receive an offer to purchase, the county would have what is called "first right of refusal." If the port receives an offer to purchase the property, then the county would be able to buy the land at that same agreed upon price.

Morrow County Commissioner Melissa Lindsay and Port of Morrow Commissioner John Murray indicated, at an earlier commission meeting, that there is an opportunity for a new business to locate at the industrial park, but the new businesses needs the land on which the emergency building sits. The business apparently has a pending sale with the port. Rather than lose an economic development opportunity, the county has decided not to purchase the property with its first right of refusal option, and instead seek another property to move its emergency management facilities.

The county has determined a piece of property owned by the city located next to the fire hall on Riverside behind Devin Oil would work for its emergency management facility. The city, however, had planned to use that property for a dog park. To free up the property, the county proposed a swap of the city-owned Riverside property for the county-owned lot next to the sheriff's office. That lot could then be turned into the dog park.

To make this swap happen, however, the county-owned property on Willow View Drive had to first be divided, since it is included in one tax lot with the existing sheriff's office. Cutsforth agreed to be the petitioner on behalf of the county to request the lot division from the city.

People at the public hearing last Monday night said they did not want a dog park there, saying the land was fine the way it has been for many years. They also learned that funding for the dog park had been withdrawn following the public opposition.

With the dog park idea dead, residents of the neighborhood still wondered, however, if the land could be divided in the future and other developments placed there. Cutsforth said there was actually no legal basis for the denial of his land partition request, and that the denial could be construed as a "taking" by the city. Cutsforth said according to city ordinance the county could have a basis for appeal to the city council of the planning commission decision. He did not say the county had instructed him or given him any indication to appeal the decision. He added that he brought the request to the planning commission only because he wanted a forum to gauge public consent for the dog park. "I found out," he said, adding that he was receiving "three phone calls a day" in opposition to the park.

It was pointed out that the lot is zoned residential and approved only for single family homes. If it were to eventually be divided Cutsforth said any other use, such as multi-family or commercial, would need to come to the planning commission for approval.

HES staff and teachers give students a summer send off

Teachers and staff line up with their vehicles getting ready to make the first trip to visit the homes of all 188 of their students. *-Photo by David Sykes.*

The staff and teachers of Heppner Elementary School (HES) gave their students a special summer send off last week when they took to the road and visited the homes of each and every one of them. Of course because of the Covid-19 shutdown students and teachers have been physically separated from each other, but that didn't stop staff and teachers from wishing their students a happy summer.

With signs reading "Have a Great Summer!" and "We love You" they piled in their cars and took off to visit each student's home. It took two days to visit all 188 students.

Heppner considers donation of Riverside property to county

Land next to fire hall would go towards new Emergency Management facilities

By David Sykes

The Heppner City Council is looking favorably on a proposal to donate a lot next to the firehall on Riverside to the county for use as its new Emergency Management facility. The proposal to donate the land came after a plan to trade it for a county owned parcel in the Lott Addition fizzled out. The county wants the Riverside land on which to move its Emergency Management facility from the old mill site. The county is currently leasing that building from the Port of Morrow, which owns the mill site, but has been told there is an offer to purchase that building so the county must find a new location.

Originally the city had planned to swap the Riverside land for the Lott's Addition property and then turn that property into a dog park. However, the idea met with such formidable opposition from homeowners in the area it was dropped. (See related planning commission story).

At Monday's council meeting, City Manager Kraig Cutsforth said the Riverside property is "prime for the building structure the county is wanting to construct." He said the current firehall takes about one third of the lot leaving more than enough room to build a new structure for the county. He said the land was a donation to the city from the Morrow County Grain Growers for this type of use. "I would suggest that the city donate a portion of the lot that meets the county's needs. This would be less than one third of the lot, leaving plenty of space for any future expansion of either structure," he said in his report to the council. Cutsforth also said the donation would make "a small gesture" toward the $250,000 that the city has received from the county in helping with infrastructure needs over the past four years. He estimated the value of the city lot in the $10 to $15 thousand range.

Mayor Jim Kindle suggested that when the city makes its final deal for the property transfer a clause might be added that in the future if the county moves off the property for some reason, ownership would revert back to the city. Fire Chief Steve Rhea said he did not have a problem with the land donation and that the fire department would still "have more than enough room to expand the fire hall if we needed to."

The council agreed it was a good thing and voted unanimously to make the 100 X 100-ft parcel "available" to the county.

In a related matter, Cutsforth announced that because of public opposition the planned dog park in the Lott's addition should be dropped. "This opposition leads me to believe the dog park proposal is a NIMBY (not in my back yard) and should not be pursued by the council at this time," he said. Following the announcement Heppner resident Sally Walker said she thinks Heppner still needs a dog park but says a better location would be by the old swimming pool at Cannon and S. Main Streets. Walker said she is prepared to raise money and recruit people for the work necessary to make it "a nice place people can take their dogs." She said there would be upcoming articles in the newspaper explaining her ideas and plans for the park.

The city of Heppner is considering donating a piece of city-owned property next to the firehall to Morrow County as a site for a new Emergency Management facility.

In other business the council heard from Barb Orwick of the Neighborhood Center, who said because of the Coronavirus lockdown there have been fewer donations coming in and no opportunity for the center to have its doors open to the public to sell items. She said at the same time because there are more people recently unemployed there is an increase in need for food from the center. She asked the council and people in the audience to remember now that pandemic restrictions are lifting to continue to support the Neighborhood Center.

In other action Cutsforth announced that city hall would be re-opening its doors to the public Tuesday morning following the pandemic lock down. "I'll be opening up tomorrow morning," he told the council.

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