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NORFOLK | REDEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL

City Council hears plan for new YMCA

OFFICIALS ARE OPEN TO THE IDEA BUT HAVE FINANCING CONCERNS

By Harry Minium

The Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK

They envision children running through an outdoor water park, families getting medical help at a health clinic, toddlers playing at a day care center and everyone getting fit in a workout facility.

Two local organizations, the YMCA of South Hampton Roads and the Landmark Foundation, have approached the city about building such a facility in Park Place.

The groups even have an ideal location for their \$10.5 million proposal: the intersection of Granby and Church streets, across Granby Street from St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery, the City Council was told this week.

While city leaders said they are concerned about financing, they think a Park Place YMCA is worth exploring.

Park Place residents are in the early stages of a neighborhood "visioning" project that would guide efforts to upgrade the area, a community the city has tried for years to rehabilitate.

Situated between the more affluent Ghent and Colonial Place neighborhoods, Park Place has struggled with blight, crime and poverty issues. The city and housing authority have spent millions of dollars on redevelopment efforts but have had limited success.

The proposed Park Place YMCA, its supporters say, would bring in even more groups to help the community. The health clinic would likely be associated with Eastern Virginia Medical School.

It would also likely serve as a new headquarters for the Planning Council, a group that provides aid to the needy, said Merv Pitchford, vice president of community services for the YMCA.

Pitchford said the Landmark Foundation initiated discussions more than two years ago about such a facility. The foundation was founded by the late Frank Batten Sr., former publisher of The Virginian-Pilot and retired chairman of its parent company, now known as Landmark Media Enterprises LLC. The Landmark Foundation provides funding for nonprofit organizations from an endowment.

Both the Landmark Foundation and the Hampton Roads Community Foundation have given the YMCA planning money for the last year and a half.

"The Landmark Foundation wants to do something that would have a lasting impact on the Park Place community," Pitchford said. "And they want the community involved."

Pitchford said a new YMCA could also become a catalyst for business development in the neighborhood.

YMCA memberships would be provided on a sliding scale. "We are prepared to subsidize the community if they can't afford our services," he said.

Assistant City Manager Stanley A. Stein said the YMCA has requested the city assemble the land and help with utility upgrades. Land acquisition at the proposed site would be more than \$2 million, Stein said.

Three other sites on land owned by the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority and/or the city may also be considered – at 29th and Granby streets, at 26th Street and Monticello Avenue and the old Stuart School site

on Carolina Avenue.

The council's reaction was largely positive, although some questioned whether the city can afford to buy land for the YMCA.

"We don't have the money," Councilman Paul R. Riddick said.

"If we can use the school site, I'm all for it," Councilman Barclay C. Winn added. "But when we start talking about buying property, I'm not in favor of that."

Nonetheless, Mayor Paul Fraim said discussions need to continue.

"These people, with all due respect, are very well intended," he said. "We owe it to them to explore this."

Harry Minium, (757) 446-2371, harry.minium@pilotonline.com



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