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Eastside neighbors divided on Sparrow proposal
By DANIEL STURM

The vocal opposition of some eastside Lansing residents to Sparrow Hospital's proposal to construct a temporary parking lot for 588 vehicles on green space at the southeast corner of Marshall and Saginaw streets is overshadowing the views of other eastside residents who favor the project.

The opponents, who have demonstrated at the site and spoken out at City Council meetings, have characterized the land as a park. They are skeptical about whether a temporary parking lot makes sense and whether it will do no harm to the park environment.

But some of their neighbors dispute that the property is a park. And they say Sparrow's proposal will reduce traffic through their streets.

Sparrow Hospital wants to lease 8.2 acres of the 27-acre natural prairie grassland, known on some maps as 119th Armory Park, from the Michigan National Guard as a temporary parking lot until June 2004 while a 1,200 car parking deck is under construction west of the hospital, above the existing parking lot. Sparrow Health System executives say they intend to return the property to its existing status at the end of the lease.

Some opponents fear that gravel, oil and antifreeze on the surface of the parking lot will contaminate the soil. The Sparrow plan foresees excavating and hauling off six acres of topsoil, re-grading the site for proper drainage, installing a soil stabilization fabric under six inches of stone and using catch basin bags to retain the oil and fuel that leaks on the property.

Ray Ziarno, Green Party candidate for secretary of state, criticized the plan and City Council for "almost exclusively favoring business, parking lots and higher income people."

"They only want developers that will develop higher-priced homes and

upscale buildings,” he said, recalling that in 2000, City Council voted to sell Genesee Park so the Greater Lansing Housing Coalition could construct two houses on the site. “These are all the same kinds of decisions in which green space in Lansing is under attack,” said Ziarno.

The Sparrow parking lot proposal failed earlier this fall by a 3-3 vote of the city Planning Board. After a public hearing on Sept. 9, City Council referred the issue to its Planning and Development Committee. Following another hearing on Sept. 30, City Council is expected to vote on the issue.

The second hearing is the result of a protest filed by John Mertz, an attorney who is president of the Eastside Commercial Coalition. Mertz had found that Council had not given proper notice for the first hearing.

Mertz opposes the parking lot proposal, calling the armory land the last remaining open space of its kind on the east side. “Fenced-in ball parks, golf courses and schools don’t count,” he said.

But Nancy Parsons, president of the Eastside Neighborhood Organization, which supports Sparrow’s plans, said, “This is military land, not the 119th Armory Park like people are referring to it.” She said that in the last 10 years the area had been used by Sparrow twice during construction projects – “and none of the individuals that are against it today came out and protested it.” Parsons pointed out that in both cases Sparrow Hospital cleaned the park up as promised. There was a signed agreement with the Military and Sparrow Hospital stating that once the project was over, Sparrow would put the property “back to the way it is now,” she said.

Joan Nelson, director of the Allen Neighborhood Center, said the east side certainly needs green space, “but it would be a stretch to characterize the area as green space. It’s been used for many non-green purposes, like Christmas tree sales and carnivals.” She said Sparrow’s plans to transport its 600 employees on three 20-passenger shuttle buses would have a net effect of reducing traffic within the neighborhood, because people wouldn’t need to drive to Sparrow’s main campus, but would park at Saginaw and Marshall. Residents near the proposed parking lot have expressed their fear of the increased traffic.

First Ward Councilman Harold Leeman is working for a compromise by encouraging Sparrow officials to look at alternative parking sites. “If everybody reviews the initial position and comes up with another solution, we could get the job done here,” he said.

His idea is to use public and private parking along the Michigan Avenue corridor. “It’s a mile distance from Sparrow Hospital to Saginaw/Marshall, but if you continue down Michigan Avenue it’s a mile and two tenths to three public parking lots that the city controls near Frandor (shopping

center).” By using Michigan Avenue, says Leeman, Sparrow would keep 600 cars and shuttle buses away from the neighborhoods, and children walking to one of the four public schools wouldn’t be affected by the increased traffic. Leeman said Sparrow has no way of insisting that workers ride the buses instead of parking on neighborhood streets.

Leeman said the city has 250 spaces along the Michigan corridor, explaining that there are 150 parking spaces at Municipal Field, a city-owned lot at Clippert and Kalamazoo streets and another 100 city-owned parking places north of Ranney Park on the eastern edge of Frandor. “We could make an arrangement with Sparrow to let their employees park there,” he said. Leeman said there are 250 private parking places adjacent to Bud Kauts Chevrolet on Michigan Avenue and an additional 150 private spots behind the water tower at Sears.

Leeman said that Sparrow might have to pay a little money for use of the private parking spaces, but he estimated it would be only about half the cost of building a temporary lot. According to the construction company contracted by Sparrow, the cost for environmental maintenance alone would be \$300,000, making an estimated total of \$500,000 after construction costs. Leeman said his solution offered clear advantages for the hospital, the residents and the environment. “We won’t have any of the safety or green space issues. It’s up to Sparrow to change its mindset. I can understand that they’ve put all that time into their solution, but I don’t think they realize how much people would object to what they want to do,” asserted Leeman.

Mertz suggested a site at the corner of Shiawassee and Larch streets with about 400 spaces, and said Sparrow could also lease the needed spaces from the North Police Precinct. “To me the most important way to bring more people to Lansing is not a new GM plant or a new parking lot, but green space,” Mertz said. “You could put a plant or parking lot wherever you want, but no one will want to live near it.”

The outcome of the City Council vote, which is expected Oct. 7, is still wide open. Council members Larry Meyer, Carol Wood, Saturnino Rodriguez and Geneva Smith couldn’t be reached for comment. Councilwoman Sandy Allen said utilizing parking on Michigan Avenue would be an “ideal solution.” Before making up her mind she wanted to see if Sparrow had investigated all possibilities, Allen said. Councilwoman Joan Bauer said she’d vote yes if Sparrow promised to clean up the area after leaving. Her colleague Tony Benavides said he’d also approve the proposal if this were the case. But Benavides, who is a Sparrow Foundation Board member, hopes the parties will be able to compromise. Otherwise he’s afraid of a “lose-lose situation” for the city. “If we approve it a number of folks are going to be upset, and if we don’t approve it we’re going to have another group of people upset,” he said.

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