

Planning board maintains split over Sparrow

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By DANIEL STURM

Lansing City Council members hoping to get more guidance from the Planning Board on the thorny Sparrow Hospital parking lot issue are going to be disappointed.

The board stuck with its 3-3 vote Tuesday night on whether a quasi-park on the east side should be rezoned for a temporary hospital parking lot.

So Council members, who undoubtedly were hoping for something definitive from the Planning Board to bail them out on the controversy, may have to decide on their own whether to choose between Sparrow's desires and the heated demands of eastside residents to block the parking lot plans.

Council has to decide whether to permit Sparrow to lay gravel over 8.2 acres of a 27-acre open area at Marshall and Saginaw streets so the hospital can use it as an employee parking lot while it builds a permanent parking structure west of the hospital over the existing parking lot. The Michigan National Guard owns the property and permits the public to use it for dog walking, star gazing and other recreational purposes when it isn't being used as a military staging area, as it was during the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

Council is still scheduled to vote Monday night, Oct. 7, but the vote may be postponed.

At Tuesday's Planning Board meeting at City Hall, members reviewed their positions on the proposal without changing them from when they voted 3-3 on Aug. 20. They put their positions in writing to City Council.

Board member Sissi Foster said she voted against Sparrow's request because there was no concrete

assurance by Sparrow that the area would be restored to grasslands after the temporary parking lot is abandoned.

Another opponent, Debra Winfrey Keene, said that a 600-space parking lot would change the essential character of the site and might also bring environmental hazards.

The board's third opponent, John Ruge, said Sparrow could use already established parking lots in the area instead of disrupting the land's recreational use.

Board chairman Andy Frederick, who supports the proposal, said that the public good sometimes needs to be interpreted as including "more than the immediate surrounding residents." Board members Jan Patrick and Holly Cordill, who favor the proposal, said they were confident the Michigan National Guard and Sparrow would restore the property as an open space when the hospital no longer needed temporary parking.

At Monday night's City Council hearing, John Mertz, an attorney and president of the Eastside Commercial Coalition, argued that Lansing's Master Plan designated the property as parks/open space and that a temporary parking lot was contrary to this plan and to the intent of zoning ordinances. "The whole purpose of your Master Plan is to get rid of spot zoning and putting parking lots next to neighborhoods, yet that's exactly what you're doing."

Sparrow President Joe Damore said that the health of hospital patients would be at risk if the expanded permanent parking lot wasn't built. "We can't ask people to park at multiple spots and drive around until they find a parking spot." Damore said Sparrow had considered leasing surface parking space in the neighborhood. However, none of the spaces offered unlimited access during the week. Sparrow attorney Marc Kennedy argued that renting two or three different lots would cause additional security and transportation costs. "What Sparrow is asking for is a little bit of help," Kennedy said.

LCC student Michelle Johnson told City Council that in Japan, where she was in an exchange program, green space was considered holy. Japanese city planners would be considered "insane" if they decided to sacrifice inner city grasslands for a parking lot, she said.

Eastside resident Jeanne Carey said she bought a house on Magnolia Avenue in 1998. Since that time her property value has increased by 50 percent, but a parking lot in the backyard would have the opposite effect. "Isn't the goal to increase land ownership?" she asked? Carey said she would consider relocating outside of Lansing if the parking lot is built.

North Clemens Street resident Nyla Munk said that since she couldn't afford to sell her home and move somewhere else, she asked that Council members not "rip the heart and soul out of our neighborhood."

A few residents speaking in favor of the proposal emphasized the economic and social factor of Sparrow Hospital's importance for the community. "Growth brings problems," said Lansing resident Jack Bates. He argued that even though the parking lot would take away eight acres of open space, there would be still enough green space in the area and that Mayor David Hollister would be a good "watchdog" in making sure the field will be restored after the parking facility expansion is complete.

Clemens Street resident Tammy Atherton was skeptical of Sparrow's promise, and the rationality of trying to restore grasslands. "Soon, we're just a business-oriented town and not a town where people want to live."

And Cindy Burns, who moved to Lansing from Portland, Ore., commented that she doesn't understand why City Hall is not investigating more options, such as the option of turning the National Guard property into a city park. "Then you could make Lansing a decent place to live."

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