

City council set to vote on senior center funding

Vote:

CITY

By Mack Burke

Transcript News Editor

The question of funding has plagued new senior center talks since voters approved Norman Forward in 2015, but, at last, there appears to be a light at the end of the tunnel.

On May 14, the city council will vote on a measure to set aside roughly \$7.5 million in savings from the Griffin Park land lease deal, another Norman Forward project, to be used for a senior center.

The council also will vote on a recommendation to select Reaves Park as the future site of the center, which preliminary plans indicate would be built at the corner

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“Even though we had two [council members] who weren’t for that, the rest of the council seemed to be,” Mayor Lynne Miller said. “So, I said ‘Well, you can vote against it, we’re moving it forward.’” The news of the upcoming vote comes on the heels of Tuesday’s study session where Parks and Recreation Director Jud Foster presented potential sites to the council — Reaves Park, Andrews Park, Ruby Grant Park, North Base and University North Park.

Reaves Park emerged as the favorite due to a number of factors: the land is available at no cost, there is room for expansion, lower cost of development than some other options and its central location.

“It would work without having to change the [Reaves Park] master plan much at all,” Foster said.

Amidst all of the support, council member Joe Carter expressed doubts. He raised concerns about traffic congestion in the area, which he said is already challenged.

“Having lived a block of Imhoff Road for 29 years and traveling this area on almost a daily basis, the traffic problems there are more than just five home football games. Every morning, there are commuters going to work ... students coming and going from class, buses coming and going, softball games, baseball games, basketball games at Lloyd Noble ... I just don’t see it.”

Public Works Director Shawn O’Leary said the University of Oklahoma has expressed interest in seeing the re-alignment of the intersection of Jenkins and Constitution in a cooperative effort to improve traffic flow in the area. City staff has met with OU staff and those conversations are ongoing.

“In our conversations with university officials, they understand that the city is bringing millions of dollars in transportation improvements, including, perhaps this [re-alignment] ... I think that’s a strong point of

In addition, Foster said the Reaves Park site has been approved by the Norman Seniors Association and both the Senior Center Ad Hoc Group and the Reaves Park Ad Hoc Group.

“The Norman Senior Association has consistently maintained a site neutral position but we’ve done this as a way to move forward in the process to getting a center that Norman seniors deserve,” Norman Seniors Association spokesperson Bette Maffucci said. “We wanted to get down the road.”

She said as long as progress continues, the council can expect the association’s backing.

The only drawback to the site, Foster said, would be the loss of an existing building at Reaves Park.

Medieval Fair organizers previously expressed some reservations about the site, as it might negatively impact the festival. City staff researched the issue and determined that it would not reduce the festival’s footprint. Festival coordinator Ann Marie Eckart did her own research and came back with a similar result.

“We were able to map it out and figure out that all the critical components, especially the joust, would still fit in the new footprint of the park,” she said, adding thanks to city staff and festival supporters for their concern.

negotiation, to say we will take care of the transportation systems if they dedicate the land we need to do it and dedicate this parcel of land to the city for future senior center expansion,” O’Leary said, adding that OU staff seems inclined to move in that direction.

Still, Carter remains opposed. He said it comes down to whether or not the council is willing to spend money on a site. If it is, he said, then Reaves Park looks less prudent.

“I just don’t know if I’m comfortable making this decision until we’ve gone through the MOU process we’re currently working through,” he said.

Ward 6 council member and Mayor-elect Breea Clark said she agreed with council member Sereta Wilson’s assessment that the city is suffering from “analysis paralysis” and expressed hope that this plan will move forward.

“We have beaten this horse so dead it’s dead like five times over,” she said. “The senior citizens group has said multiple times that they want this site. The Medieval Fair group has said that they’re comfortable with this site. I’m ready to move forward tomorrow. It’s time. It’s been time.”