

PARKING, EXPANSION

Panel advances library plan

By Robert Koch

NORWALK — A Common Council sub-committee on Wednesday evening edged closer to an agreement aimed at securing additional parking and future expansion space for the Main Library on Belden Avenue.

"We're very pleased that, so far, every city agency that has considered this has approved it on an almost-unanimous basis, including the Planning Commission, the Parking Authority and now the Land Use Committee with only one 'no' vote," said Alex Knopp, former Norwalk mayor and current library board chairman. "So we feel there's strong support in Norwalk and we look to get over the goal line next week."

Knopp's comment came after the Land Use and Building Management Committee voted 5-1 to advance the agreement under which the city would pay 587 CT AVE \$460,000 by the end of August and have six years to decide whether to buy the 1.25-acre property at 11 Belden Ave. for about \$4.88 million. Approval of the agreement would immediately secure the city use of the private parking lot fronting Mott Avenue from the property.

The full council will consider the agreement on Tuesday evening.

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LIBRARY

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Wednesday's send-off came a week after residents, during a joint public hearing at City Hall, urged the Land Use and Finance/Claims committees to back the agreement.

Councilman Thomas P. Livingston, the District E Democrat who chairs the Land Use Committee, cited "broad support" and said he received only one email against the plan. He pointed Wednesday to a pile of petition pages in support of it.

"We also have here — that were handed to us at the public hearing — roughly 1,500-plus signatures," said Livingston before addressing the cost of the agreement. "It is expensive but I think it's necessary and a good idea."

Livingston thanked Knopp for negotiating the agreement.

He and fellow Democrats Michael DePalma, Nicholas Sacchinelli, Bruce Kimmel and Phaedrel Bowman voted to send the agreement to the council for action.

Councilman Richard Bonenfant, an at-large Republican, voted 'no' after citing the cost. He acknowledged the community support for the agreement but added such support is based on how the proposal was presented.

"If you say, 'Do you want more parking at the library?' everybody is going to say, 'Sure, I want more parking at the library,'" Bonenfant said. "But on the other hand, when I ask people, 'How do you feel about somebody who bought a property for \$2.5 million two years ago and he's selling it back to you at \$5 million?' not too many people get enthused."

Bonenfant said the city would end up paying \$210 a day to obtain the additional parking and retain the right to buy the land over the next six years. "I've got some

issues with that," he said.

Kimmel acknowledged the city would have done better if it had kept its eye on the ball and bought the private parking lot two years ago. However, he described the agreement as worth its cost "not only (for) the library, but you've got people parked over there near some businesses."

"There's a lot of stuff," Kimmel said of parking demand. "I'm willing to see what a couple hundred (dollars) a day gets us. You know, it's a library. It's important for our city."

DePalma described the agreement as "a lesson learned." He said it would have been better if the city had had the foresight "of being at the table a few years ago."

"But the bottom line to me is this is what the cost of it is and we've got independent appraisals," he said.

The Board of Estimate and Taxation is scheduled to vote on the \$460,000 expenditure on Monday.

Last month, the Norwalk Parking Authority pre-emptively accepted the privately owned lot at 11 Belden Ave. into its inventory. Under that action, the 28-space lot owned by 587 CT AVE would be combined with the library's 14-space lot.

With the signing of the agreement in state Superior Court in Stamford earlier this year, the Norwalk Public Library Foundation agreed to withdraw its appeal of the Norwalk Zoning Commission's approval of a 69-apartment development for the private lot.

Upon receipt of the \$460,000, 587 CT AVE principal Jason Milligan would withdraw and void the apartment plan and agree not to submit another development project for the lot without the permission of the city for six years.

The agreement comes as the library board looks to modernize and expand the library at 1 Belden Ave. The historic Carnegie library was last expanded in 1982.