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Biddeford moves forward with parking garage

BY **DINA MENDROS**

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Shown is a rendering of a parking garage that Biddeford City Council is considering building at 3 Lincoln St. COURTESY PHOTO

BIDDEFORD — On April 2, Biddeford City Council approved several measures that provide another step closer toward building a parking garage in the city center.

The council approved going forward with designing the second phase of the garage, proceeding with the permitting process, as well as investigating public/private financing of the garage that would make a private entity responsible for financing, constructing and operating the structure.

A city-owned parking garage to serve the downtown and mill district has been discussed for many years and the subject of several city-financed studies. Under

Mayor Alan Casavant, serving his third term, the garage is becoming more and more of real possibility, although it's not without its critics.

Some say there is enough parking and a garage is unnecessary. Others say it will only benefit the private owners in the mill district so that those developers should pay for it. Biddeford resident Jason Litalien says before moving forward and spending millions, the city should wait until litigation he's filed against the city is concluded because if he wins the city won't be able to charge for parking and have no revenue to pay for a parking structure, which is to be paid for by the users.

"You're all aware that there is pending litigation that could derail this process," Litalien said. "Please take a more judicious approach with the millions of dollars at stake."

However, the mayor and other proponents say the structure is necessary for the revitalization — what Casavant calls a Biddesance — of the city that is already underway. He says the city has had companies interested in locating in many of the current vacant spaces in Biddeford but they have looked elsewhere because of the lack of parking.

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"Over the last few years, we have witnessed increased pressures on parking, and we know that there are soon going to be even more people in the downtown placing additional demands on parking, so we need to plan accordingly for the future," said Mayor Alan Casavant. "It is important to respond to momentum in the development process now rather than try to play

catchup when new development opportunities are presented."

By building a parking garage, he said, companies that could bring good paying jobs and add to the tax base would see Biddeford as a viable place to locate.

Ward 5 Councilor Amy Clearwater, whose ward includes 3 Lincoln St. where the debated parking garage would be located, said on Tuesday that the parking garage isn't just for businesses in the mill district or the downtown but for everyone.

"The garage is the necessary next step" for economic development for Biddeford and "to build the tax base and reduce (residents' property) taxes," Clearwater said. "This alleviates the tax burden, that's the goal of the project."

The vast majority of the city's expenditure budget is to pay for the salary of city staff, Councilor Marc Lessard said, and wages go up about 2 percent every year, meaning the budget, and property taxes, must also increase to keep the same level of services. "The only way you can slow that is by having additional revenue, by diversification of the tax base," he said. Lessard sees a parking garage as an answer to attracting businesses to Biddeford and grow the city's tax base.

In order to move forward with a parking structure, the council approved on Tuesday working to obtain the necessary permits needed for construction. The process is estimated to take four to six months.

It also approved having Desman Design Management design phase II of a parking garage. The proposed phase I would include 522 spaces, phase II would add about 120 more spaces. The cost of the phase II design is up to $75,000.

According to figures provided by Chief Operating Officer Brian Phinney, the current demand for parking in the mill district that would use a parking garage if one was available is 272, more than half the spaces in phase I. If additional projects that are in development in both the mill district and downtown come to fruition, the total demand would be about 960. Economic Development Director Mathew Eddy said parking space projections were determined through developer projections and standard parking requirement calculations.

Since having the city pay for the garage is the most controversial issue, the council also voted to enter into a preliminary development agreement, or PDA, with Biddeford Innovation, Inc. — made up of Treadwell Franklin Infrastructure Capital Partners/James W. Sewall Co. — to explore public infrastructure financing to pay for a parking garage, pedestrian connections between a garage, other areas of the mill district and the downtown, and a portion of the city's RiverWalk.

Public infrastructure financing has been used only recently in the U.S. but for about two decades in the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, according to Phinney.

Under this form of financing, the contractor would handle financing, construction and cost overruns for a parking garage — the contractor would also build the pedestrian connections and part of the RiverWalk. It would also operate and maintain the structure for a prescribed period of time, about 40 years, and then sell the structure back to the city for $1. The city wouldn't get off scot-free, it would be required to contribute financially to the maintenance of the garage.

Although the council approved the PDA, it could elect to move forward by instead financing a garage with a revenue bond, or it could decide to not build a parking structure. If the city does not go forward with the public infrastructure financing it must pay a $40,000 "break-up" fee to cover the costs the company has incurred to explore financing and other requirements.

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