

GROWTH

Poll: Tall buildings opposed in Fairhaven

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THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM — Fairhaven residents don't want tall buildings in their backyards, according to questionnaire results released Wednesday by the neighborhood association.

Preserving the character of the historic neighborhood was of highest importance to residents and business owners, according to the questionnaires.

The results come amid debate over whether the city should create height limits for buildings there, largely driven by the long-stalled 10-story Fairhaven Harbor development. Ted Mischaikov and Rick Westerop's proposed residential-commercial development between Harris and McKenzie avenues and Eighth and Ninth streets has stalled for years amid opposition from neighbors concerned about the tower's height. Currently, the developers and city officials are negotiating over permitting for the project.

Of about 390 questionnaires returned, 76 percent oppose Fairhaven Harbor (51 percent said it would have a "very bad" overall impact, and 25 percent said "bad"). Only 12 percent said it would be good for the neighborhood, and 12 percent were indifferent. The poll was not scientific.

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Respondents ranked preservation of historic character as most important, followed by preserving the neighborhood's pedestrian emphasis, natural habitats and views of Bellingham Bay, respectively.

Fairhaven Neighbors board President Vince Biciunas said she was pleased to see, from the association's questionnaires, that neighbors support what the board is doing.

"We're trying to keep what we love about Fairhaven, and have developers and builders build, but don't go crazy on us," she said.

Mischaikov said the questionnaire wasn't aimed at resolving the debate over his project, because questions ignored details of the project and relied instead on emotional gut reactions.

"They don't ask any qualitative questions that would make the questions meaningful," he said. "They want to have one more arrow in their quiver that they can shoot at this project."

Fairhaven Neighbors organized the distribution of about 1,080 questionnaires, and about 36 percent of them were returned, Biciunas said.

\$100+ million shortfall projected

Ratio of parks to people goes up

by SHERI WARD

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BELLINGHAM - One more possible roadblock to expansion of Bellingham's Urban Growth Area (UGA) will very likely be removed at City Council's upcoming meeting on April 30. At that meeting, council is expected to adopt an increase of parkland from 42.2 to 47.5 acres per 1,000 residents. This is a change from approximately 1,840 square feet of parkland per person to 2,070 square feet. The city would then be required, by policy, to maintain this

ratio of parkland to people as it annexes land in the UGA and any possible expansion areas beyond that.

Expansion into the UGA and beyond is tied to parkland because the increased ratio is part of the justification the city has used to defend its need to expand. Without the increased park ratio, the projected land needs of the city would be reduced.

Projected costs for the additional required parkland, as a result of the city's possible expansion, will exceed \$100 million over the next 15 years, with some estimates double that amount. (Estimates vary considerably, depending on assumptions of rates of inflation for revenues and expenditures.) By comparison, the

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Greenways III Levy passed in 2006 will collect approximately \$44 million over a 20-year period.

At its April 2 meeting, City Council was urged by Assistant City Attorney Alan Marriner to adopt the higher ratio of park service in order to remove inconsistencies in the Comprehensive Plan. According to Marriner this would render the Comp Plan compliant with the Growth Management Act (GMA). City Council did make this change, on a 5-1 vote with Councilor Barbara Ryan dissenting. At the April 30 meeting, council is expected to confirm this change in a final vote on this ordinance.

The Comp Plan had recently been challenged and reviewed

by the Growth Management Hearing Board (see WI issue of Jan. 11-17, 2007). The finding of the board was that an internal inconsistency between two stated ratios of people to parks did in fact exist, and required the city to remove the inconsistency. Adoption of the higher ratio would do that, but also potentially obligate the city to higher expenditures for parks.

The city currently has no financing plan in place to cover the \$100-plus million cost of additional parkland. At the April 2 meeting, Marriner and Leslie Bryson of the city's Parks Department said that revision of the financing plan should be deferred until next year, when the Parks Plan comes up for its regular six-year review.

Councilor Barbara Ryan, in her statement of objection to

the ordinance, said, "To pay for the plan the staff has outlined... would actually require a property tax increase of almost \$160 million. That's absurd in a 15-

... revision of the financing plan should be deferred until next year, when the Parks Plan comes up for its regular six-year review.

year time period."

The lack of a financial plan for the additional parkland may, in and of itself, render the Comp Plan non-compliant with the GMA. According to state

law, "If the probable funding for capital facilities at any time is insufficient to meet existing needs, the land use element must be reassessed." (WAC 365-195-315(2)(f))

Ryan said, "I move that instead of adopting the recommended 47.5-acre level of service, we adopt a park level of service that requires no additional property tax increase and that we adjust the Park Impact Fee so that those who create the need to expand our park system provide at least 50 percent of the funds to do so." The current Park Impact Fee is set to provide 35 percent of funds for additional parks.

Her motion received no second. Review of the Parks Plan and financing for it will likely be deferred until 2008. *WI