

Land purchase deal entices Council, offends some Chamber members

By Jeanne Davant

Manitou Springs Chamber of Commerce President Dave Symonds came to Tuesday's Council meeting with an offer to pay \$165,000 to the city for the land that houses the Chamber's building.

While the offer intrigued some Council members as an unexpected source of funds to help shore up the budget, some Chamber board members said they had not had a chance to discuss the proposal and did not even learn it was being considered until late last week.

The city owns the 15,000-square-foot lot at 354 Manitou Ave., while the Chamber owns the building. The Chamber pays the city a nominal amount for leasing the property under a lease that will expire in 2012.

"We have a reserve fund," Symonds told Council. "The city is currently in a precarious situation that is dependent on sales taxes.... If the sales numbers don't come in, you might want to close on this before the end of the year." He said he and Chamber Executive Director Leslie Lewis had discussed the idea for purchasing the property.

Symonds said he had real estate broker Jerry Trent research the price and draw up a contract for the property. The Chamber would pay for a survey, and Trent told him title work could be completed in about 10 days.

"We put in the date (of Dec. 10 for closing) because of the possibility the city could end the year in the red," Symonds said.

Some Council members said they were interested in exploring the proposal and discussed possible uses for the money.

"I'm having a hard time seeing why this is not advantageous to the city," Mayor-elect Marc Snyder said. "(The land) is not an asset that's available to us. It would be nice to have it as a cash investment."

Councilman Matt Carpenter said he supported the proposal.

Not so fast, other Council members said.

"We have a contract and no appraisal," Councilwoman Aimee Cox said. "I don't think we should be entering into any real estate contract without an appraisal." She said she thought the Fountain Creek Restoration Committee should be consulted about any change of ownership, since the creek flows through about half of the lot. Cox also questioned the price, stating that she did not think the undevelopable creek portion was equal in value to the rest of the property.

"My understanding was that you still have a lot of selling to do to your board members," Councilman Ed Klingman said, adding that he thought promotional funds given to the Chamber and membership dues commingled in the Chamber's reserve fund, "going toward purchase of property we already own," raised a question of conflict of interest.

Symonds said "most of the (Chamber) board members support" the proposal.

But Tim Haas, owner of the Garden of the Gods Trading Post, said: "The Board of Directors of the Chamber and the membership have not been consulted on this. I think postponement is in order. It is not within anybody's purview to spend money on an appraisal without the approval of the board and the membership."

And Karen Cullen, owner of Victoria's Keep Bed & Breakfast, said she "totally disagreed" with the action the Chamber's executives had taken. "I can't support this because it has not been addressed by the board."

The proposal also prompted a sharp exchange between Mayor Eric Drummond and Councilwoman Donna Ford.

"I think a big mistake has been made by this council by not putting this in executive session," Ford said. "We should have asked the question before we started."

Drummond said that while he had concerns about it, he had placed the proposal on Council's open-meeting agenda because he didn't see any reason why it should be discussed in an executive session. State law allows potential land sales to be discussed in a closed session.

Council ultimately agreed to indicate they are interested in the proposed deal but to wait until staff and the Chamber have further reviewed it to take any action.

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