

New park proposed for Capital City

[By Stephen Mills Staff Writer](#)
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This rendering shows a proposed new city park on the site of a parking lot adjacent to the former Montpelier Beverage & Redemption Center in the Capital City. Image Courtesy of Elizabeth Courtney

MONTPELIER — Montpelier City Council is being asked to “stick a stick in the spokes” of the planned redevelopment of land adjacent to the former Montpelier Beverage & Redemption Center on Main Street in the Capital City amid calls to create a new city park on the site instead.

The request came from resident John Snell at a Wednesday City Council meeting to discuss the plan for a building on the spot and the creation of 28 parking spaces behind it.

Instead, a counter proposal suggested using the site for a new city park that would tie into the Confluence Park across the North Branch River. The Confluence is part of the Taylor Street transit center and housing complex that would serve a new residential neighborhood in the area.

The Mowatt Trust owned the former beverage center. The beverage center and nearby former Vermont Association for the Blind building were both demolished to allow for the construction of a recreation path linking Taylor and Main streets. A third parcel of land adjoining the beverage center is also in play as the city decides how to redevelop the site with a proposal to build an office or apartment building.

The Mowatt Trust originally proposed to build on the site but withdrew after uncertainty about the timeline of the recreation path project. Instead, it sold the site to the city for its assessed value but remains interested in redeveloping the site.

Wednesday’s discussion revolved around the logistics of moving ahead with the development proposal. City Manager Bill Fraser said building on the site was already permitted and the council needed to decide whether to seek developers.

But representatives of the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition suggested scrapping the building project in favor of a riverfront park to serve new residents of two

current housing projects in the nearby French Block on Main Street and the Taylor Street transit center and housing complex. Nearby Christ Church is also planning to build affordable housing.

“I think the first thing that I would ask of the council is to not keep going with the current plan until you look at other options,” Snell said. “Then, if you decide, this is the plan that needs to happen, then go for it. But I think we have a real opportunity that the scene has changed and it’s very important to stick a stick in the spokes and stop it.”

Fraser noted that a decision on a change of direction would have to be made within the next three months to issue a “change order” for the construction company that would complete the adjacent recreation path project by May.

Fraser noted that proposed development of the site preceded the proposed public parking garage on State Street. It was possible that parking spaces for the building project could be moved to the garage, freeing up green space along the riverfront, Fraser said.

Conversely, Fraser said parking on the building site might be needed to compensate for the loss of up to 17 parking spaces on Barre Street to allow for a suggested extension of the recreation path from Main Street to the Montpelier Recreation Center to connect with the recreation path on Stone Cutters Way.

There is also concern that a developer might not be able to get a bank loan for the building project if it did not include parking spaces, Fraser added.

Dan Jones, executive director of the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition, said a recent roundtable of coalition members and city representatives expressed interest in what was described as the “Lower North Branch Neighborhood.”

“It was a discussion of how to begin to think about tying together the various silos of projects that were going on: the Taylor Street project, the parking garage and the bike bridge,” Jones said. “It seemed to be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rethink that area into something that was a hallmark or gem of the city, not just a place to pass through. The idea was that by opening up the Mowatt property, or at least a portion of it at the end of the bike bridge, it becomes more of a park.”

Jones said there was also a need to develop a riverfront district in the city.

“There’s a great yearning in Montpelier to have access to the water, and more of it the better,” Jones said. “This is a great time to change your priority.”

Nonprofit consultant Elizabeth Courtney, who produced the rendering of the proposed park, said the proposal could involve working with landowners abutting the river to allow for landscaping along its banks through the Aubuchon and Jacobs’ parking lots.

A majority of councilors said they favored looking at the park proposal and called for more public debate on it before making a final decision.

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