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Collaboration could expedite downtown playground

By Pippa Fisher



Lafayette community stakeholders and city leaders have been looking at alternatives for bringing a children's playground to downtown and, although the idea is in its infancy, they are now looking at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center amphitheater as a possible location instead of Leigh Creekside Park.

Residents might remember the acrimonious meetings from more than five years ago regarding the development of a play area at Leigh Creekside Park, pitting young parents desperate for a place to let their young children run, climb and enjoy, against residents in the area who just as passionately argued for keeping the small, leafy park next to the creek passive, for the enjoyment of nature and tranquility.

Could the underutilized LLLC amphitheater be the future location of a children's play area?

Photo Pippa Fisher

So it comes as something of a surprise to see various members from both sides of that polarizing argument coming together to explore a possible alternative.

The city council received a letter co-signed by Park, Trails and Recreation Director Jonathan Katayanagi, members of the PT&R commission and subcommittee, and three volunteer community stakeholders, and heard a preliminary presentation of the idea at the Feb. 22 council meeting.

Parks Subcommittee Chair Mark Poole explained that they would be asking the city to put the Leigh Creekside Park environmental impact review on hold, and allow staff to use the \$25,000 currently budgeted for that and add \$25,000 from Fund 12 to hire consultants to work with the LLLC and the community to develop a proposal.

Poole noted that downtown parks have long been a priority for the city, and that with increased housing, that need would only increase, even for small parks. Describing it as a win-win, he said it could play a key part in a vibrant downtown located near the Park Theater, opposite the soon to be developed plaza at Golden Gate Way, and near the creeks trail as it is developed in the future, and would attract people to the library while taking advantage of the underutilized amphitheater area.

One site, known as "Library Park" that had been identified in the city's downtown specific plan as a possible park location disappeared from consideration with the approval of the Madison Park Apartments development in its place.

Public comment was positive with parents welcoming a play area downtown. LLLC Foundation Executive Director Beth Needel said that the foundation was looking forward to hearing more about the idea at an upcoming meeting. Needel said that while it is still premature she is intrigued and certainly understands the necessity for a downtown public park.

Katayanagi explained after the meeting that as part of the EIR work required for Leigh Creekside Park, reasonable alternatives for the project or its location had to be found. Although in 2017 when the EIR work began he said no one was ready to collaborate, as tempers cooled parties were more willing to explore ideas together.

The PT&R will work with the LLC, the Friends of the Library and the Lafayette Historical Society to engage and look for their support and partnership ahead of reaching out to members of the public. If it is well received it could be back to the city council in the spring.

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