

Council puts brakes on Cass Park project

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WOONSOCKET – City Council members voted 5-1 to table a resolution hiring an architecture firm to design the community center and concession stand at Cass Park.

Council member Scott McGee was the lone opposition in Monday's vote, which came after nearly an hour of discussion over the merits of using a \$5.4 million federal grant to construct a community center next to the new athletic complex going in at Cass Park.

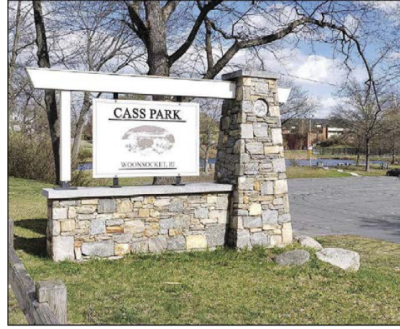
At the last regular meeting two weeks ago, the council approved hiring Pare Corporation for construction and permitting needs after amending the resolution to explicitly exclude any work related to the community center. The hesitation of a majority of council members stems from terms in the grant that require the community center to be constructed at Cass Park and provide certain services for at least five years.

The council intended to continue hashing out the community center details at a special

meeting the following week, April 8, but the closed-door portion of the meeting ran longer than expected and the Cass Park agenda item was tabled.

Two main issues with the community center surfaced during Monday night's discussion. The first centered around the net profit from the sale of gravel, which Council President John Ward suggested was not as high as indicated on the final gravel removal report provided by Public Works Director Steve D'Agostino.

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The City Council voted this week to hold off on plans to hire a design firm for the proposed community center and concession stand at Cass Park.

File photo

Project

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The last gravel report in February lists a net profit of just over \$1 million, but Ward said he found two expenditures from last fiscal year that were not included, bringing the actual total closer to \$500,000. He explained that the numbers didn't square with the "campaign promises" from former Mayor Lisa Baldelli-Hunt that the sale of gravel would provide funding for a majority if not all of the Cass Park project.

"I don't want this council or anyone to presume that - I hate to repeat it but it's the fact - that 'there's gold in them thar hills,'" he said, quoting an October 2023 press release from Baldelli-Hunt. "It's not. There was a space that was going to be used for a field, and it was extracted, and it brought in money, and it cost a ton of money, and with everything else added to it, it may cost close to the same as the money we took in."

D'Agostino pushed back and said that the expenditures already taken from the gravel revenue were for site prep that would have been necessary anyway, even if a new field had been built in the same spot as the old one.

"We're going to agree to disagree," he said. "If you had put it in the exact same spot that it was, or you didn't remove the hill, you start with nothing.

You made money, you just spent it on the facility."

The second issue was directly related to the community center, with Council member Daniel Gendron reiterating concerns about including certain addiction treatment or resources at the site so close to the high school in a building students are likely to use.

"I will not be supporting this tonight for the simple reason of the inclusion of a community center," he said. "As previously discussed, I will not support putting a community center at the Cass Park athletic complex."

He added that part of the issue with the community center is that the council was not notified of or consulted on the grant application until the end of the process, when the state had already locked in the location and the pressure was on to secure extra money when gravel sales fell short.

"This feels like it's turned into a runaway train," he said. "It feels like the community center has become a bailout for the Cass Park project."

Mayor Christopher Beauchamp said the state was clear that receiving the \$5.4 million grant is contingent on locating the center at Cass Park, but that the services could still be changed. The YMCA and Thundermist Health Center, which were suggested in the initial grant application two years ago, are still on board with providing

services or programming to meet the education, work training and health monitoring requirements of the grant, he said.

"These were suggested community partners," he said. "Every one of them is suggested. Nothing is permanent, nothing is concrete. I can assure you there will be no opioid, no drug anything in the community center."

Though Soucy also voted to table, he and McGee expressed frustration that the project was dragging when it seemed like a good thing for the city.

"We should be celebrating every time we come together talking about this thing," Soucy said. "That gravel was always going to be just gravy, to me."

Earlier in the meeting, a resolution authorizing the next step for the food hub project started under Baldelli-Hunt's administration failed for lack of a motion. The project, which envisioned a food hall with multiple small businesses, was to be funded through a \$3.2 million grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration. In preparation for the project, the city purchased the former Aaron's building on Social Street for \$790,000 using American Rescue Plan Act funds.

The resolution that died at Monday's meeting authorized the Mayor to grant the EDA a mortgage, a required step for the city to secure the grant that the council said it was unaware

of until recently.

Now left with the building on Social Street and no food hub plan, Ward suggested asking the state whether the community center could be located there, possibly split with another building at Cass Park that would house athletic amenities like showers, locker rooms and weights.

"This plan... though it's well intended, will likely never provide the improved or increased educational support for our students that the governor so fervently seeks and will only serve to relocate the health services described in the proposal, not enhance them," he said. "The core issue is: Why have we no ability to pivot when things change, when there are better opportunities to consider and discuss?"

Beauchamp agreed to ask the state for that flexibility, though he said he was doubtful they would grant it since the terms of the federal aid were clear.

McGee said he would rather move forward and resell the Social Street property.

"We're having all these meetings and we're not really getting anywhere, it's just slowing things down," he said. "As far as Social Street, if we don't want to use that building... let's just put it back on the tax roll. Let's just sell it. The state said no and they're probably laughing at us at this point."

Another special meeting to discuss Cass Park and

the other items tabled at the April 8 meeting has not yet been scheduled.

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