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Will Lafayette Get a Central Park Downtown?

By Cathy Tyson



The Lincoln Building parking lot. Photo Cathy Tyson

Lafayette."

He acknowledges that if the park came to fruition it would benefit literally hundreds of people daily due to its location close to two schools, two senior housing complexes and across the street from the library. Falk sees this property as the best location in the city for a downtown park, and notes that other small cities have a downtown park, like the Sonoma Plaza or Healdsburg Town Square.

"Pulling this off will require a big vision from the city council and Lafayette's residents, but it's a truly rare opportunity that's before us, one that could have an impact for many generations to come," he said.

While the owner of the property, John Protopappas of Madison Park Financial Corporation, has not agreed to sell the property at this point, he has entered into discussions about it with the city. However, Falk says he told the city the owner is waiting for the outcome of the Lafayette sales tax measure before proceeding.

Back in January, the city council agreed to split the cost of an appraisal with the owner. The aging 27,500-square-foot building has 22 residential units and approximately 25 small businesses; together with the adjacent parking area, the two parcels are roughly 1.5 acres.

Virtually all of the ground floor units in the Lincoln building used to be apartments, but were flagged by the city as illegally converted to commercial businesses without permits. In 2014, the city informed the property owner that there was a five-year window to either restore the units back to their original residential use or obtain the appropriate permits.

If Library Park comes to fruition, an active park could replace the large flat parking area bordered by a creek, and the vintage building could be demolished. In its place, a number of options for a new building include condominiums, a police station, a civic building, a senior center, a recreation center or a combination of uses.

There are some big hurdles to clear for the city's dream of a centrally located Library Park to become reality, and only time will tell if an existing building and parking area will be transformed into a public park.

At issue is the vintage Lincoln Building and adjacent parking lot directly behind the Lafayette Library and Learning Center on Golden Gate Way. Several things will need to happen to turn pavement into what some community leaders call a civic paradise: namely a commitment by the city council to purchase the property, making a mutually acceptable deal with the seller, and coming up with the money, estimated to be more than \$10 million.

City Manager Steven Falk summed up the situation: "Many (perhaps) unlikely things will have to come together before Library Park graces downtown

The creek, which is now hidden away in a concrete channel topped by a chain link fence and barbed wire at the rear of the property, could be greatly enhanced, possibly with financial assistance from the Contra Costa County Flood Control District, which realizes the downtown channels, installed in the 1960s, are at the end of their useful life. The district already has a plan in place to convert channels into more natural creeks.

If a joint city hall and police station was erected, it could result in a longterm cost savings, as the city currently spends more than \$300,000 per year to rent space in Desco Plaza. The future of the park will have to wait for the outcome of the November election, along with the decision of Protopappas, who didn't respond to a request for comment.

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