

Capitola offers to buy park site

By JONDI GUMZ

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CAPITOLA — The city of Capitola, hoping to end the ongoing debate over the future of Jade Street Park, wants to buy the 10-acre site.

The question now is whether the Soquel Union Elementary School District, which had planned to build a school there, is willing to sell.

In a unanimous vote Thursday, the City Council agreed to "seek every means possible" to buy the property and work with the district to pass a bond to upgrade school facilities.

"Let's not just think about Jade Street," Mayor Dennis Norton said. "Let's think about

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

A group of tennis players learn the game at Jade Street Park in July 1999. The property is owned by the Soquel school district, which long has planned to build a school there but let the city use it in the meantime.

Jade Street

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the schools too."

The district had proposed building an elementary school at Jade Street so the overcrowded New Brighton Middle School campus could be expanded into adjacent Capitola Elementary School.

The city proposes to expand New Brighton into nearby Monterey Park, 4 acres of land next to the school and owned by the city.

Councilwoman Stephanie Harlan said the city asked about buying the Jade Street park two years ago, but the district wasn't interested. City officials did not say what they would be willing to pay.

Adding on

Architects estimate it would cost nearly \$22 million to add new facilities to New Brighton and modernize the campus or \$26.4 million to demolish the existing facilities and start from scratch. Upgrading the three other district schools would cost another \$8 million.

Schools chief Dan Cope said he was glad to see the council trying to help the district solve its facility problems.

A \$15-million bond measure to build the new school and upgrade the others was on the March ballot, but fell short

of the two-thirds vote needed — mainly because of community opposition to building at Jade Street Park.

School board president Judy McGooden said the people who oppose a school at the park are just one part of the district, which includes Soquel and the Santa Cruz Gardens neighborhood as well as Capitola.

"We have a lot of listening to do," she said.

The school district has scheduled public hearings, starting in January, to get feedback on the proposed school, a possible new bond measure and grade or boundary changes as a short-term solution to space problems.

A school-city committee that studied five sites ranked Jade Street first, although Monterey Park was a close second.

City officials have gotten a notice from the district that their lease to the Jade Street Park property will expire July 26.

Weighing options

Joan Fuhry, formerly the athletics director for the recreation program jointly run by the city and school district, urged City Council members to move quickly to offer an alternative to building a school at Jade Street.

"We need to be able to attend these hearings with a plan," said Fuhry, who heads the Save Jade Street Park Com-

mittee, which has a mailing list of 400.

Several residents agreed with her, including former council candidate Kathi Howard, former mayor Ron Graves, former councilwoman Margaret Fabrizio, and Donna Brown, past president of the Tradewinds mobile home park, next to Jade Street Park.

"We don't want to lose Capitola Elementary, and we don't want to lose Jade Street," said parent Marybeth Cahalen.

Council members were enthusiastic about Fuhry's presentation, which was similar to recommendations from City Manager Kathleen Molloy to begin negotiations with the school district.

"This can happen," said Vice Mayor Gayle Ortiz. "Thank God for you showing up and giving us a kick in the pants."

Councilman Tony Gualtieri, who had refused to oppose the March school bond, said his re-election campaign persuaded him that voters want to keep Jade Street Park.

The Monterey Park alternative "is something we can work together on," he said.

"I know it's hard for the district to make alterations in their plans, but the consultant's study makes you wonder if a new elementary school is needed."

Molloy said the city could apply for \$5 million in state park grants and refinancing bonds that expire in 2004 to buy Jade Street Park.

District seeks input

Residents of the Soquel Elementary Union School District are invited to attend public hearings to comment on plans to change school attendance boundaries or the grades served at each site; passing a bond; and if and when a new school will be built. The dates are:

■ Jan. 17, Main Street Elementary auditorium, Soquel;

■ Feb. 7, Soquel Elementary multipurpose room, Soquel;

■ Feb. 21, Santa Cruz Gardens Elementary library, Santa Cruz;

■ March 7, Capitola Elementary multipurpose room, Capitola;

■ March 14, Main Street Elementary auditorium, Soquel.

Hearings begin at 6:30 p.m.

The city also could offer to trade the one-acre site on which the New Brighton Middle School gym sits, she said. Other negotiating chips could be city help to build affordable housing for teachers on a district site or to relocate the district offices or bus yard.

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