



# Centennial Park expansion studied

Written by

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At the riverfront's edge, just west of Centennial Park in downtown Fort Myers, six parcels of land lie untouched.

There was a time when the vision for that land included a sprawling, 27-story luxury condominium complex - a \$100 million project called The Vue, with restaurants and shops below, along the outstretched pier.

But the economic downturn forced the developer to abandon those plans last year.

Now, Councilman Mike Flanders is saying that might not have been such a bad outcome.

At his urging, the city agreed this week to begin discussions about possibly purchasing those foreclosed parcels from the bank and expanding the 10-acre park by about 2.4 acres total.

The park, a cultural hub of the city where festivals, concerts, rallies, farmer's markets and more are regularly held, is nestled along the banks of the river, just below the Caloosahatchee Bridge.

What once would have been a \$17 million acquisition is now an estimated \$1.5 million for all parcels combined, according to the county's property appraiser. That's three parcels on the waterfront and three smaller parcels on the adjacent side of West First Street.

"There's really no harm in having everyone sit down at the table to discuss it," Flanders said. "It's a win-win for the public right now, with property values being so low and not really having a market or any desirable buyers to buy that property."

Nothing has been signed, but council passed a motion directing the city manager and staff to open purchase discussions not only with the county, which has more resources and negotiating power, but also with a national nonprofit organization called The Trust for Public Land, which helps local governments acquire large-scale private properties for public use.

Mayor Randy Henderson agreed the city needed to seize the moment.

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"I have felt that we have politically missed public purchase opportunities in the past, and we have suffered from it," Henderson said. "Once it gets into private hands, we can pull and tug on it, but it's private and subject to whatever private owners want to do with it. This is an opportunity."

County Commissioner Frank Mann said he is favorable toward the idea, but isn't sure to what extent the county could offer involvement. One possibility is for the county to purchase the property, and then lease or sell it to the city. But Mann said a sagging market is a double-sided coin.

"The good news is this is the best time ever to secure the property because the price is a fraction of what it used to be," Mann said. "But it's a bad time in terms of the funding the county may have available for it."

He noted, "But they're not making anymore waterfront property, so this could be extremely valuable."

Residents and nearby business owners were pleased with the possibility.

Ross Webb, who operates the Edison Sailing Center to the west of the vacant parcels, told council having closer access to more public land would help the center thrive.

Ellen Peterson, chairwoman of the conservationist organization Sierra Club Calusa Group, had been opposed to the Vue construction plans. She supports any measure that would preserve the property

and give the public greater access.

"This would be a wonderful asset to the city," Peterson said. "I would just encourage people to contact their council person or their commissioner and let them know what this means to them to have this."

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## Possible park expansion

Fort Myers has agreed to begin exploring the purchase of six vacant parcels on the downtown riverfront for public use. Before the economy went south, the parcels were intended for a development of residences and shops.



SOURCE: CITY OF FORT MYERS

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