

Battle for Riverside Park land shaping up

It's city's financial welfare versus space for recreation

By Ann Bolde
Day Staff Writer

Some city officials think land-poor New London should consider cashing in some of its waterfront property to provide needed luxury housing and tax revenue.

Others feel New London needs to hang on to every precious acre of public land it has.

The "battleground" is Riverside Park, an 18-acre tract with a commanding view of the Thames River and a famous neighbor to the north — the Coast Guard Academy. A rival to Ocean Beach in popularity before the 1938 Hurricane, the park is now neglected, vandalized and overgrown.

Some members of the city's Harbor Improvement Agency are now saying the park should be sold to build housing for employees of the many high-technology firms now located in the city. The plan would also generate new tax revenues for a city which has lost almost half its property to tax-exempt government, educational and charitable institutions, the members argue.

But the new proposal is already meeting opposition. Mayor David M. Fabricant has vowed to fight it, and Recreation and Parks Director Herbert F. Moran has called the idea "rotten."

A state environmental review team report requested by the Conservation Commission last year also indirectly recommended against such a plan, saying financial considerations should not be the only ones in developing land use plans.

New London, with an area only slightly larger than six square miles, has about four miles of waterfront on the Thames River and Long Island Sound. Most of the waterfront is privately owned and heavily developed. City officials say less than a mile is publicly owned, including Ocean Beach, which is one-third of a mile long.

Three of the harbor agency's five members met recently with the commission to ask that several parcels of city-owned land, including Riverside Park and the small park off Pequot Avenue across from Greens Harbor Beach, be considered for housing development.

The agency asked the commission to consider rezoning the waterfront parcels to permit construction of "suitable" housing for potential new residents of the city. If New London wants to continue to lure high-technology firms, it will have to provide quality housing, the agency members maintained.

"There's no sense having all these technology firms come here if their employees are going to go home to Waterford at night," said Frances E. Baldini, a member of the Harbor Improvement Agency. "People think there's not much land left in New London, but if you look like we did, you'll see there is a lot of potential."

Mrs. Baldini said she and commission Chairman Demetrios Louziotis recently toured the city's shoreline to look for waterfront property that could be developed as housing. In addition to the parks, she said city-



Former camp house at Riverside Park and view of the Thames River beyond

Day photo

owned tracts off Howard and Bank streets were also pinpointed and discussed at the Nov. 4 commission meeting, also attended by agency member Robert P. Wildes Jr.

The agency members, who asked for the joint meeting, initially requested that the discussion be held in executive session, excluding the press and public. Commission members, however, said the information was not privileged and the proposal

would have to be discussed in open session.

Two commission members — Ann Marie Keating and James S. Butler, expressed doubts about using the parkland for housing.

"I don't think the city can afford to lose any more land for recreation," Mrs. Keating said. "It's my feeling there isn't enough recreation space now."

Butler, who is employed as a

planner, said, "I think the development of housing on parkland in the city would be ill-advised and show a lack of foresight."

Fabricant agreed and said he personally would lead an effort to save the park.

"Any suggestion that Riverside Park be anything but a city park would be strenuously resisted by the people in city government," the mayor said.

"It's the only thing we've got left. It's the only passive recreation space besides Bates Woods that the city's still got," said Moran. He said the city has 271 acres of public open space — 113 acres shy of what the federal government has said is adequate for a city the size of New London.

Moran described Riverside as a neighborhood park and said, except for the Winthrop School playground off Crystal Avenue, it is the only public playing space in the northeast end of the city.

The property for the park was acquired by the city in the 1890s, but wasn't developed until 1928. Today, the steep sloping hills there lead down to the Thames and are overgrown with pines, oaks and other hardwoods.

There is a picnic grove, eight acres of hiking trails, a small beach, playground equipment and basketball courts.

The park is rarely used and frequently vandalized. One argument of the agency is that the city has ignored the park and let it become a wasteland. And because of that there is concern on the part of Louziotis that the Coast Guard will take the property by eminent domain to expand its adjacent academy.

Twice already — in the 1930s and again in the 1960s — the academy has taken portions of the once sprawling park to improve its facilities.

"I grant that the city has woefully neglected the park," Fabricant said. "But a proposal like this will force us to go to work on it."

Agency member Wildes said residents in the northeast end of the city deserve a park, but commented that

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they apparently are not using the one they have now.

"Take a walk up there any time," Mrs. Baldini said. "There's not a soul there ever. There's just no use for that park anymore."

"I don't think the city is ready to sell Riverside Park," planning and zoning member Joseph C. Heap II said. "But maybe the suggestion (to build housing there) is really not so off base. Everybody needs housing and you have to admit, the city has neglected Riverside."

City Manager C. Francis Driscoll said it is more difficult to make an argument for saving Riverside Park because the city has never made a commitment toward upgrading it.

The recently completed coastal area plan for New London, however, argues in favor of retaining the park.

"New London's shorefront is for the most part intensively developed and in private ownership. Therefore there is a need to preserve and protect existing parks and public areas, including Riverside park, City Pier, Greens Harbor Park and Ocean Beach Park," the plan says.

City Real Estate Director Robert J. Flanagan said the proposal to build housing at Riverside will make for a good debate.

"It's a tough question," he said. "There's a market for that kind of housing today, especially with a waterfront view. But taking parkland is another question."

The commission will consider the proposal over the next several months as it updates its zoning regulations, Heap said.