



New London wants master plan for Riverside Park work

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By **Colin A. Young** (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=c.young)

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New London - The city will enter into contract negotiations with a Mystic-based landscape architecture firm to develop a master plan for long-discussed improvements at Riverside Park, and to provide engineering and design services to restore Veterans Field to a usable condition.

The City Council on Monday took steps to hire Kent + Frost Landscape Architecture to develop plans to make improvements to both parks and waived the normal bidding process, partially in the interest of time.

The council voted 6-1 on each proposal, with Councilor Martin T. Olsen dissenting on both votes.

"The work is needed, but I quite frankly question the need to waive to formal bidding process," Olsen said. "There really is not an emergency and going through the proper process would be most appropriate."

The plan to improve Riverside Park is based largely on a proposal developed in 2011 by the Community Research and Design Collaborative at the University of Connecticut. To better link Winthrop Elementary Magnet School, the park and the Thames River, the plan would involve building a set of stairs from the school to the park, a pedestrian bridge over the railroad tracks on the riverbank and a pier to stretch out into the Thames River.

The plan also calls for additional picnic and activity spaces within the park.

In July, the council approved an appropriation of \$925,000 originally part of a 2011 bond ordinance to fund improvements to the park.

Early phases of the project are expected to include general landscaping and a better connection between the park and the Winthrop School. Later phases could include the pedestrian bridge pier.

According to a debt service schedule Finance Director Jeff Smith prepared for the councilors, the city's average annual payment for the Riverside Park project would be roughly \$67,000 and will not necessitate a tax rate increase.

In 2011, the park was nearly sold to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, a proposal that narrowly failed at referendum and led to a grassroots effort to save the park and the creation of the Riverside Park Conservancy.

The work at Veterans Field on Cedar Grove Avenue will restore the field to the condition it was in before the city put temporary modular classrooms there to use while two elementary schools were built.

Last month, the School Building and Maintenance Committee voted to proceed with the Veterans Field restoration project and fund it as part of those previous school construction projects.

"Veterans Field is currently an open sore in the Cedar Grove neighborhood," said Councilor Michael Passero, who is also the chairman of the School Building and Maintenance Committee. "It has been a long time that field has been out of use."

Passero said he hopes that by waiving the bid process for the design work, the city can put the full project out to bid and have it completed during the next construction season.

c.young@theday.com (mailto:c.young@theday.com)