

WestLinn Tidings

Will sun set on neighborhood park?

The future of West Linn's Sunset Park teeters on outcome of upcoming city ballot measure in May

BY KARA HANSEN

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Sunset Park and Sunset Primary School have sat in the heart of the Sunset neighborhood for more than 100 years.

A ballot measure coming before voters this May asks residents to make a choice if they want their neighborhood to stay that way: sell 1.6 acres of Sunset Park — about a third of the park — to the West Linn-Wilsonville School District, giving it space to replace the primary school in its present spot without having to bus children elsewhere or teach them in trailers during construction. Otherwise Sunset Primary could be rebuilt in a different location.



VERN UYETAKE / WEST LINN TIDINGS
Sunset neighborhood children, from left, June Hohl, Ally Bledy and Evan Khoo play at Sunset Park, a neighborhood fixture for more than 100 years.

It's a compromise some residents would rather not make.

"They've created an ultimatum out of this," said Val Prothero, part of a group of neighbors who have rallied to oppose Measure 3-358. "I don't want to vote for it out of fear."

The measure asks voters to approve the sale of part of the park for \$483,000 to the West Linn-Wilsonville School District, which would replace the aging education facilities with a new building before demolishing the old one.

Measure 3-358 is bundled with another on the ballot aiming to annex about seven acres off Parker Road as the likely location of a new police station. A deal brokered with the school district, which owns the Parker Road property, would then allow the city to buy it for about \$2 million.

A third measure asks voters to back the issuance of up to \$10.8 million in bonds to finance the new police and court building. If that one fails but the two property measures pass, the city would still buy the Parker Road property using money in this year's budget, said Kirsten Wyatt, assistant to the city manager of West Linn.

If voters OK the bond measure but the property measures fail, the city would still have the authority to issue bonds but would have to find a different place to build the new police station.

City Manager Chris Jordan said the district might want to keep the Parker Road property as a possible future school site.

Prothero participated on a committee of stakeholders charged with recommending the location of a new Sunset Primary, long a target for replacement in the school district.

On one hand, the present location on Oxford Street is smaller than the district standard for new schools. But the cost of rebuilding there appeared about the same as at the alternate choice, Oppenlander Field, used by students not only from Sunset but from throughout West Linn. Another task force already concluded renovations would be too expensive, and that initial committee felt the school should move because its property was too small.

Prothero said the newer committee was clear with its proposal: rebuild on Oxford Street next to the park; if necessary, consider buying a "minimal portion" of the green space.

last week. "We want them to address those (space) issues with a smart design."

She and other neighbors aren't convinced the school needs a larger property.

"They want a premier green school, and they want to do it by taking away a premier green space," said Carrie Hansen, who lives across the street from Sunset. "There shouldn't be a need to choose between the park and the school. I think people are afraid the school district will make good on its threat to remove the school from its community."

West Linn-Wilsonville School District Superintendent Roger Woehl said district officials are moving ahead with the committee's recommendation to rebuild Sunset Primary in its current location. "But to rebuild at that site, to make it a viable site, we need additional space."

Even with the extra acre and a half of land — which would expand the Sunset school property to a total of about six acres — the district would fall short of its preferred site size: 10 acres.

Woehl said that size is based on a combination of factors, including the building footprint, required parking spaces — based in part on the building's size — and recreation areas.

He acknowledged Bolton and Willamette primary schools sit on plots smaller than 10 acres.

Questioned whether officials could adjust the ideal size to be smaller after exploring more design options at Sunset, he said no: "The district is choosing not to do that."

"We think it's a better environment for kids and learning to have that space," Woehl explained. "That's what we do: make choices that are best for kids."

"It's the district's perspective that if you rebuild, the additional land is necessary. The school board, in accepting that, has said if this election doesn't provide for additional space there, they will come back and reconsider whether they should look at Oppenlander in the future."

Sunset Neighborhood Association President Troy Bowers said he understands residents' fears.

"For 115 years, the two pieces have made a whole," he said, referring to the park and school. "They are the heart of this neighborhood."

Still, he is urging neighbors to reconsider their opposition to selling some of the park. It took two years for the district to change course, from possibly moving the school to instead rebuilding it.

"There are likely five more years of this process," he said. "If the school district doesn't have the wiggle room to make this work, they may indeed do something else."

But he hopes the district won't need the entire 1.6 acres it would buy if the ballot measure passes.

"Giving up a third of the park is not a minimal portion," Bowers said. "But I think by working with the elected officials in the city and at the school district, we can continue to have a process where we say, 'How much of this land do we really need?'"

Bowers said that if the school is rebuilt elsewhere, the district could sell the current site for new housing.

"If we don't do this, we're certainly going to lose out," he said. "At the end of the day, I think we can end up with a revitalized school and a revitalized park that serves the neighborhood."

If the measure passes, the city and school district would need to work out a maintenance and public use agreement for the next few years, said West Linn Parks and Recreation Director Ken Worcester.

They would then work together, as well as with community members, to "master plan both the park and the new school design," one that "gives the public the best and most possible use out of the whole area."

"There could be an opportunity to develop other portions of the park, and improvements could be made in areas of the park that would not necessitate tree removal, though that could always be an option," Worcester said.

The Sunset school playground is only available to younger children when school isn't in session.

Evan Khoo, 6, said he often comes to the park to play with friends.

"Why would they ever want to take away the park?" he said. "If they take the park, the nature, what will we have left? I mean, it's natural."

Colin Hansen, 12, agreed.

"This park is filled when the weather is nice, it's such a great place," he said. "The part they're selling would be devastating to lose. This is the perfect place."

Amanda Bledy, 12, who has grown up across the street from Sunset Park, said she also worries about losing a sense of community. That's what the park means to her.

"A whole bunch of people come here to have fun," she said. "It's really beautiful to look at. ... It's one of the oldest parks in West Linn."

Added Carrie Hansen, one of the neighborhood parents: "And sometimes, old is good."

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