

Voters face park question

Ann Arbor News (MI) - Friday, October 31, 2008

Author: JUDY McGOVERN

At issue is whether sale of city park land will require ballot approval

The Ann Arbor News

Ann Arbor voters have a park question on the ballot again this year.

But instead of deciding whether or not to OK a tax - the usual reason for a ballot question - city residents are being asked to amend the city charter to require a vote on the sale of any park property.

Although several City Council members view the amendment as unnecessary because of existing restrictions, the ballot measure hasn't generated any visible campaign - pro or con.

"It's political," said City Council Member Leigh Greden, who with Council Member Marcia Higgins voted against putting the question before voters.

The ballot question does, indeed, respond to waves of criticism that have washed over city hall in recent years when citizens have reacted to suggestions that Ann Arbor officials could dispose of park land.

"I think it will help with that," said Mayor John Hieftje, who pushed the charter amendment onto Tuesday's ballot just a year after a similar effort failed. "But mostly I want people to be secure about parks ."

Centered on the Huron Hills Golf Course, the recurring controversy about the possible sale of parkland dates to 2005.

At that time, city employees were encouraged to look for unconventional solutions to a budget crunch and suggested selling acreage adjacent to the golf course. Their research

included the preparation of a real estate appraisal and map that alarmed neighbors adjacent to the green space.

While the proposal was, city officials insist, quickly and permanently rejected, several decisions since then have revived concerns among residents, and it's been an issue in 2nd Ward elections.

At the same time, City Council members have generally held the view that a charter amendment is a redundant step that does little to produce real change. State law already prevents communities from selling park land that's designated as such in master plans.

In response to residents' concerns and news that another southeast Michigan community had skirted the state law by revising its master plan and then selling land, former City Council member Bob Johnson last year proposed a charter amendment.

City Council members who said no to Johnson's plan talked, among other things, about their reluctance to close off options for future elected officials.

Hieftje surprised other elected officials when he revived the idea this summer. And he's happy to limit those who follow him.

"I want to be secure about parks and know that future City Councils, looking for revenue, will have to get voter approval to sell any park land," he said. "If this passes, they'll need to make the case to voters. It doesn't preclude selling land.

In August, city officials made several changes to the proposed ballot language before agreeing to put it before voters.

"We got more clarity on what was in and what was out," said Council Member Stephen Rapundalo, who had been cool to the proposal but ultimately supported it.

The question on the ballot specifies that voters must weigh in on the disposition of park land in the city. Ann Arbor has

some acreage outside its boundaries. It leaves city officials with the ability to lease park property.

That's intentional, said Hieftje.

"From time to time, we've thought about how nice it might be to have a restaurant near the river. I think it's something people would really enjoy," he said. "That would be impossible if the ballot measure was expanded to include leasing."