

Killebrew: City's gift is investment in future

A&M-CC hasn't made specific plans for land

By Beth Wilson

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Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi officials haven't disclosed what they will build on city-owned land near the island campus, but President Flavius Killebrew said the city can consider the gift of that land as an investment in future educational opportunities.

After Killebrew addressed the City Council on Tuesday regarding possible expansion into 156 acres of city-owned land off Ennis Joslin Road, council members indicated they were in support of giving the land to the university. They didn't vote because a vote on the matter wasn't scheduled.

"Dr. Killebrew, you have asked for the city to make a commitment so you can take that to your board, and we intend to do that," Mayor Henry Garrett said.

The university needs to expand to prevent an enrollment cap at 10,000 students, a threshold expected to be reached in four to five years, university officials have said. Current enrollment is 8,173 students.

"It's an investment in the future of young people in the city," Killebrew said. "Without expansion of the university, the educational opportunities just aren't going to grow as they ought to."

City Manager Skip Noe said an official resolution will be before the council on Aug. 21 to allow the city to start the process to transfer that land to the university. An agreement on the deal would be back before the council in September. The university will present the issue to its board of regents at a December meeting, after which master planning can begin to determine what will be built on the park land.

Councilman Mike Hummell tried to pin down Killebrew on what is planned for the site, saying neighbors and residents can't weigh in on the land transfer unless they know what will be there.

Killebrew said a master plan detailing what would be on the site can't be done until the university owns the land and receives approval and funding for a master plan from the Texas A&M University System Board of Regents.

Killebrew said a conceptual plan, dubbed the University Village, which was done when the university was considering expansion onto the city's Oso Beach Municipal Golf Course, still is the guiding plan for expansion off the Ward Island campus.

The offer of the golf course drew some opposition and presented legal entanglements related to its use.

The current option of gifting South Guth Park and nearby land was proposed as an alternate to the Oso property in March.

The University Village concept for expansion unveiled in January included housing, a research park, athletic fields and a research center. The academic core would remain on the island.

On Tuesday, Killebrew told the council the off-island property could include parking, housing, recreational fields and storage buildings. After the meeting, he said the university would not build high-rise dorms next to the neighborhoods surrounding the park land and would not build a football stadium on the park site. The university doesn't have a football team.

The park land is the site of three youth baseball and kickball leagues. The city plans to relocate the parking lots, 12 fields, five concession buildings, five lavatory facilities and batting cages to a site off Paul Jones Avenue at an estimated cost of \$7.5 million. No interruption of league play is anticipated, as city officials have said the university can't use the land until the replacement site is ready.

A university study found that 90 acres of this park land could be built upon, compared with 130 buildable acres in the golf course option.

Killebrew said the park land is adequate and will allow the university to expand to serve 16,000 students, which is projected enrollment in about 15 years. The Oso option wasn't immediately available and the university needs to start planning now to avoid an enrollment cap, which would, in effect, limit the educational opportunities by turning away students, he said.

Killebrew said if the university needs more space in 15 or 20 years it will be open to all options for expansion, including considering some housing downtown, an area identified by the council as priority for revitalization.

Council members mentioned their connections to the university -- Melody Cooper and John Marez said they graduated from the island campus, Cooper's daughter and Priscilla Leal's grandson are planning to attend -- and thanked the city and university for cooperation on this expansion and a focus on education.

"The university to a large extent has transformed the city," said Councilman Bill Kelly. "I'm excited you want to expand ... I'm looking forward to continuing the partnership we have with the university."

Hummell said after the meeting that he was in favor of university expansion and the city's role in it, but wanted details about how the university officials would use that land, and how they know if it's enough without knowing what they'll put there.

"If we are going to give them city land, it's not unreasonable for us to know what their plans are," he said, adding the land transfer likely will be worth millions of dollars.

Contact Beth Wilson at 886-3748 or wilsonb@caller.com.



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