

NEWS

Kent City Council adopts policy for selling surplus property after Pine Tree Park debacle

by [STEVE HUNTER](#), Kent Reporter Courts, Government Reporter
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Kent City Councilman Jim Berrios pushed for a 20-day public notice for when the city considers selling surplus property. — Image Credit: COURTESY PHOTO

If the Kent City Council considers selling another park, residents won't be left in the dark.

The council unanimously adopted a new policy on Tuesday night to establish a public participation process before deciding to sell, transfer or exchange city-owned property.

The council took the action as a followup to avoid another Pine Tree Park mess, an expensive and embarrassing decision where the council voted to sell the neighborhood park for \$2 million to a housing developer in September without any notice to residents.

Neighbors near the park later found out about the sale when the city posted notice about the proposed development. Residents successfully fought to save the park. The council in April reversed itself and stopped the sale, costing the city about \$800,000 to settle

up with the developer for ending the sale agreement.

Before the vote on Tuesday, the council changed a couple of notification requirements that the council's Operations Committee passed on May 3 on the proposed ordinance.

Notice about a public meeting for potential surplus property to sell must go out 20 days prior rather than 15 days. And property owners within 1,000 feet of the land must be mailed notices as opposed to the initial proposal of 300 feet.

"I think in light of the fact that we have gone through a process of working with the public on a situation where it was clear we could have done a better job with notification, I think we owe it to the citizens to at least give them an extra week for notification," Councilman Jim Berrios said. "I know we started with 10 days (city staff proposal), but I think doubling that to 20 days would only be appropriate if we are truly wanting to be transparent in processes like this."

A couple of residents testified before the vote in favor of extending the number of days and the distance for which property owners get notified.

"Fifteen days notice? Well that will cut down the amount of time the public has to organize," said Anita Veen. "Mailing to those within 300 feet? In the case of Pine Tree Park that would have reached only a handful of households."

Councilwoman Tina Budell said she looked at city properties on the East Hill, West Hill and near Panther Lake and decided that 300 feet wouldn't include enough property owners.

“After the (Riverbend) par 3 and after Pine Tree, we need to get it out there and let everyone know what our intentions are and to make sure we don’t have another issue where we are costing taxpayers money,” Budell said. “I think better notification earlier on, less problems later on in the process.”

The policy will require at least one public meeting to receive public comment; posted notice at the property; a public notice in the newspaper; and a mailing to property owners near the site. City staff and the council didn’t take any of those steps prior to the Pine Tree Park sale.

Councilwoman Dana Ralph asked city staff to respond to a resident Kristy Herrick’s request that a list of surplus properties be made available to the public.

“It seems extremely reasonable to me to have that availability to our residents,” said Ralph, who proposed getting the information up on the city website. “If we could look into that and come back (with a plan), I would really appreciate that.”

Mayor Suzette Cooke told Ralph she would ask city staff to look into how to get that surplus property information to the public.

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