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Land swap may open park space along Mystic

By Matthew McLaughlin

City and state officials last week unveiled a proposed land-swap between Somerville and the commonwealth of Massachusetts that will bring the city closer to revitalizing Assembly Square.

Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone and State Sen. Pat Jehlen, D-Somerville, along with representatives of Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT), the principal owner and developer at Assembly Square, unveiled a plan to exchange waterfront land currently run by the Department of Conservation and Recreation with land currently used for boat storage. The presentation took place by the Mystic River on DCR land. A large portion of grassy area was roped in to emphasize the amount of green space the city would acquire.



“The result will be a vibrant, mixed-use urban village and commercial center that provides local and regional benefits while mitigating development impacts,” a flyer at the event said.

The proposed exchange, known officially as Article 97, requires any sale, easements or changes in use of public parkland to be approved by a two-thirds majority vote of the Legislature. The measure has already passed the House and is expected to pass the Senate, Jehlen said.

“Efforts from Rep. (Denise) Provost ensured the bill was very strong,” she said. “I expect it to pass.”

Article 97 requires that any land exchange does not result in the state losing land. Therefore, 1.8 acres of land controlled by FRIT will be exchanged for 1.5 acres of land controlled by the DCR.

In order for the plan to work, the city and state had to convince future Somerville furniture store IKEA to move their proposed new building away from the waterfront. IKEA was willing to make the changes even though they already were legally permitted to build on the waterfront, said Dan Driscoll, an official with FRIT.

The Article 97 agreement also coincides with several other improvements to Assembly Square. New storm water drainage pipes will improve water quality in the Mystic River. The project must meet specific environmental requirements by the Department of Environmental Protection to ensure water quality is not diminished by the project.

Transportation to Assembly Square will also be improved, Curtatone said. A new Orange Line station is planned to open as early as 2013. The project will also improve pedestrian, bicycle, transit and vehicular access to Assembly Square and Draw 7 Park, he said.

Most residents who spoke at the event praised the development, although some were disappointed by the announcement that it would take more than 10 years for the project to be completed.

Not everyone was happy with the development, however. Jim Tatosky, representing the Winter Hill Yacht Club, said they were being “bullied” by the city and forced to give up their land for the proposed development. This is the third time they had to move the Yacht Club, Tatosky said.

“I just want everyone to know that we are being displaced,” he said. “We are blue collar, working class people. We have been good neighbors. We are not against the development, despite what people may have heard.”

Curtatone said the city is working with the club, but took issue with the accusation that the city was treating the club unfairly.

“Saying you are being bullied is incorrect and you should take it back,” Curtatone said to Tatosky. “I’m sorry, but there is better use for the land than boat storage.”

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