

06/09/06

Wanted: Laishley Park private investment

PUNTA GORDA -- City officials will soon learn if private developers are interested in building additional amenities in Laishley Park.

The city's Community Redevelopment Agency board -- which includes the City Council, Jane Sturges and [Frank Weikel](#) -- agreed Wednesday to put out a request for proposals.

The RFP is a call for developers who might be interested in constructing a second building for the marina that would house a restaurant, retail stores or other uses and other amenities that the city plans for the park but can ill afford at this time.

The city has invested \$7.5 million into the park, and that money is being used to rebuild the marina, a marina building, parking and other amenities. On Wednesday, the CRA agreed to invest another \$130,000 for 14,000 additional cubic yards of fill to meet permitting requirements.

"Expensive dirt," Mayor Steve Fabian quipped.

But the city hasn't had the money -- especially since the devastation Hurricane Charley caused, drastically reducing the tax values of properties within the CRA -- to pay for other amenities, such as a carousel, interactive fountain and open-air market.

City officials hope the RFP will return with plans that include construction of those and other amenities.

City Manager Howard Kunik said the RFP is written in "general language" to allow flexibility and creativity in the offers. Unlike other city RFP requests that usually have 30-day deadlines, Kunik said he expects to give potential developers 45 to 60 days to come up with an offer.

Councilman Tom Poole said he was worried the city might receive proposals with parking lot designs that might eat up large areas of the park.

"We have Fishermen's Village, which is a commercial hub, but is that our intention to do (in Laishley Park)?," Poole asked.

Kunik assured Poole he will include the city's land-use regulations for parking, as well as the city's master plan for the park, with the proposal packet.

Councilman David Phelen thought it was premature to look for problems or to anticipate what type of proposals the city will receive.

"We won't know until we receive proposals," Phelen said.

The idea for the RFP was first broached by local restaurateurs.

Representing Ron and Chris Evans, owners of Smugglers and and Captain's Table restaurants in Fishermen's Village, attorney Michael Haymans told the CRA board in February his clients were ready to build a two-story, second building at the marina and were willing to pay for the planned outdoor market pavilion, parking, an interactive fountain and possibly other amenities.

In exchange, Haymans said his clients wanted a long-term lease to open an upscale "crab house" restaurant at the marina.

You can e-mail [Steve Reilly](mailto:reilly@sun-herald.com) at reilly@sun-herald.com.

By STEVE REILLY

Staff Writer