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Sports complex? Housing? Ideas arise as Portsmouth approves $10M Community Campus purchase

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PORTSMOUTH — Mayor-elect Deaglan McEachern called the City Council's unanimous vote Monday to spend $10 million to purchase the 34-acre Community Campus building and grounds "a pretty big deal for the city."

The property is owned by the Foundation for Seacoast Health, a nonprofit corporation which runs a multi-tenant non-profit center at the site.

“I’m happy this council saw the opportunity there and we were able to take that opportunity unanimously,” McEachern said Wednesday.

“What that opportunity does is give us options about what residents want to do out there. We could potentially think about housing or increasing recreational activities or increasing the mission of the Seacoast Community School that’s already out there,” he added.

The Seacoast Community School, according to its website, is a child care and early learning center at Community Campus that is “the third largest licensed early learning center in New Hampshire, with over 260 children enrolled in our diverse educational and enrichment programs.”

McEachern has neighbors whose children attend the school, and when the idea of the city purchasing Community Campus first came up, they talked about the importance of keeping the school in place, he said.

“It’s something we could look at to potentially expand the opportunities there. How do you make Portsmouth a place where workers want to come, you give them opportunities for high quality child care,” he said. “This is something that there’s obviously an acute need for.”

Mayor-elect calls for community input

McEachern is eager to hear from residents about how they want to see the property used.

“I trust the citizens of Portsmouth will come up with their own ideas about how do we prioritize all these different opportunities moving forward,” McEachern said.

As soon as the city closes on the property, McEachern pledged to form a City Council subcommittee “that’s looking into the best way to get input from residents on how the land should be used,” he said.

“They’ll be focused on and dedicated to this project and how best to start the public hearings on this,” he said.

The City Council has not yet had any formal discussions about how the property should be used.

Sports complex seen as one possibility

One of the ideas that’s been floated by some is to use at least part of the land to create a multi-sports center.

But McEachern stressed Wednesday “nothing has been set in stone, we’re just at the start of this process.”

Recreation Board Chair Carl Diemer spoke Monday during a public hearing to support the purchase.

“It’s going to create a huge opportunity for a lot of different reasons, not only for recreational purposes but for additional social services that are already provided out there,” he said. “It will also provide additional land opportunities for possible public/private partnerships ...about a sports complex or even public/private housing projects.”

For comparison: Is Edge Sports Group complex right for Portsmouth? Here's how it worked elsewhere.

The council also this week voted to approve “a supplemental appropriation of $116,000” to “cover operation and maintenance expenses” at the Community Campus.

“These monies will cover utilities, custodial services and maintenance of the facility. Future budgets will be developed based on the city’s actual operations expenses once staff have fully programmed the campus and existing contracted service agreements have expired,” Acting Deputy City Manager Suzanne Woodland said in a memo to the council.