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Portsmouth investigates potential environmental issues at Community Campus. Ex-mayor raises concerns.

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PORTSMOUTH — City staff are doing their "due diligence" to investigate whether there are any environmental issues at the 34-acre Community Campus property and grounds the city recently agreed to purchase for $10 million, according to City Attorney Robert Sullivan.

Sullivan acknowledged former Mayor Rick Becksted had "conveyed to us" a report from a resident that areas at or near the Community Campus property had once been used for a dumping area for debris or infill from the city's North End urban renewal project.

"We take any concern of that nature with the type of seriousness that's called for in a $10 million real estate transaction," Sullivan said. Consulting engineers for the city are conducting the work at the site, he said.

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

"They are the experts and they are doing the investigatory work necessary to tell us what the environmental situation is on the property," Sullivan said.

The City Council voted unanimously in December to spend $10 million to purchase the 34-acre Community Campus property, which is owned by the Foundation for Seacoast Health, a nonprofit corporation that runs a multi-tenant non-profit center at the site.

The council voted earlier in 2021 to authorize City Manager Karen Conard to negotiate a purchase-and-sales agreement with the Foundation For Seacoast Health.

The two sides do not yet have "a signed agreement," Sullivan said Wednesday.

City attorney expects Community Campus purchase will happen

Mayor Deaglan McEachern previously called the purchase "a pretty big deal for the city" and said the property could potentially be used for housing, for a sports facility or to expand the Seacoast Community School that's located on site.

If it's determined that there was dumping on site, Sullivan said "that would not be unusual."

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"There are established ways to deal with it," he said.

Sullivan remains "very confident" that the sale will go through.

"Keep in mind that this was a unanimous vote," he added.

Becksted believes areas of the Community Campus property were used as dumping areas after the demolition of homes during the city's urban renewal process.

"It's part of the city's history. Even though none of us were a part of it, we have a responsibility to make it right," he said. "Between Community Campus and Banfield Road, all of that is urban renewal."

The news about the city's due diligence on the property comes this week after the city's Trustees of the Trust Funds suspended their meeting Tuesday to get more information about trust disbursements to be used as part of the $10 million land purchase.

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Board Chair Thomas Watson said the trustees "suspended our meeting in order to allow the Legal Department to come up with additional documentation."

"We're always concerned that all steps are properly followed with our trusts and it's our job not to distribute money we shouldn't," he said Wednesday. "The documentation which the trustees saw had enough ambiguity in it to require clarification and that's what we asked the city attorney for."

He believes once that information is received, trustees will vote to disburse $627,496 from the Peirce Estate Trust toward the Community Campus purchase, along with $25,542 from the Daniel Street Trust.

Along with Becksted, former city councilors Paige Trace, Esther Kennedy, Petra Huda and Peter Whelan appeared at Tuesday's meeting and raised concerns about the process, Watson said.

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Becksted stressed that he supports using the monies from the trusts for the purchase, but said, "I wanted to make sure we followed the proper procedures."

“I think the trusts should have been part of their own vote as a separate resolution,” Becksted added.

The Legal Department is prepared to “provide the trustees with whatever they require,” Sullivan said, “and we’ll do that as soon as we can.”

“I’m absolutely certain the council has authorized the transfer of the trust funds and I’m willing to do whatever is necessary to accomplish that goal as expeditiously as possible,” he said.