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Portsmouth approves use of trust funds in $10 million Community Campus purchase

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PORTSMOUTH — The City Council this week voted to authorize using more than $650,000 from city trusts to help purchase the 34-acre Community Campus property and grounds.

The previous City Council voted in December to authorize City Manager Karen Conard to negotiate a purchase-and-sales agreement with the Foundation for Seacoast Health — which owns the property — the buy the land and campus facility for $10 million.

But members of the Trustees of the Trust Funds decided to seek more information before authorizing the disbursements from the trusts, after several former city councilors raised concerns about the process, according to Thomas Watson, who chairs the board.

During Monday's City Council meeting, City Manager Karen Conard said "essentially what the" trustees "are looking for is a motion from the council to ratify the council vote taken by the previous council ... and this motion would contain express language authorizing the disbursements of the requested funds."

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The council then voted unanimously to approve the motion, which called for the disbursement of $627,496 from the Peirce Estate Recreational and Environmental Trust and $25,542.95 from the 135- 143 Daniel Street Charitable Trust, according to city records.

Mayor Deaglan McEachern said he was "happy that we can ratify the vote that Councilor (John) Tabor and I previously took on this."

"This Community Campus is going to be a big deal for the city, we're going to be very much involving the council and the community to decide on this so I'm happy to bring this back forward," he said during Monday's council meeting.

Before the vote, city staff also shared a letter with the council about using the trusts toward the $10 million purchase from Thomas Donovan, the director of Charitable Trusts for the state Attorney General's Office.

In it, Donovan states that the Daniel Street Trust "may be used to acquire, develop or improve a public facility and its associated programs for recreational, educational and other civic purposes."

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"The Community Campus would seem to be such a facility with associated programs," he said.

The Peirce Trust funds, he said, can be used "for the acquisition of property or the furtherance of projects for the benefit of public recreation for the protection or enhancement of the natural environment, and for no other purpose."

"The outdoor recreation and natural environment portions of the Community Campus would seem to be such a property and projects," Donovan said.