



Belk Park Subdivision Not Recommended By Wood River Planning Commission

by Dalton Brown, News Reporter
August 17 2023 9:27 PM

WOOD RIVER - Members of the Wood River Planning Commission voted 9-1 not to recommend subdividing a portion of Belk Park to the City Council at their meeting last night. [Last month](#), the item was tabled after over two hours of public testimony in opposition, and the developers have since [canceled their plans](#) for the park. The item only resurfaced because it had been tabled and now goes to the City Council for a vote on Sept. 5.

While last night's meeting wasn't two hours long, it still saw plenty of public testimony against the proposed subdivision of the park. Nobody spoke in favor of the item, and nearly everyone who spoke against it said they were opposed to any subdivision or future sale of the land to any private developer.

Several cited the land being designated a public park as part of Robert Lee Belk's will, which the city agreed to when they accepted his donation of the land in [1953](#). Many of them also cited alternative uses for that portion of the land, including a dog park, picnic tables/benches, badminton courts, and much more. Some residents, and one commission member, called for a referendum to leave it up to Wood River voters.

"I'm opposed to the city selling that off for any private development," resident Rosalie Huebener said of the land. "That belongs to the citizens of this city, and shame on us if we do it. Mr. Belk left that property to be used by the community."

Commissioner David Watts asked Huebener if she would be opposed to the city developing the land into something for the citizens to use. Huebener said she was only opposed to private development and would not be opposed to the city developing it for public use.

Resident Linda Morrison said she didn't want to see what happened to Riverfront Park in Alton happen to Belk Park in Wood River.

"I can remember when Alton had a beautiful park at the riverfront that was willed to them, but they sold it to the Alton Belle and now you have parking lots and an amphitheater," she said. "It's not used very much by their citizens - I'd hate to see that happen here."

Resident Bill Rogers said violating Belk's will could lead to a lawsuit for the city and told commissioners to "comply" with the will of Wood River residents.

"It could make the city susceptible to a lawsuit for violating the terms of that will," Rogers said. "As representative of the people here, in this , you have two choices - compliance with the will of the people, or resign - I mean, that's what it comes down to. The people want it left as a park - comply with the will of the people."

Resident Jeff Dupy said he's been regularly using Belk Park for biking and fishing since 1972, and that this specific portion of the park has too much potential for public use to sell it to a private developer. He added that many other communities actively try to improve their parks year after year.

Others raised concerns about the slippery slope of changing the land's zoning classification, an increase in traffic, needing a greater police presence, and more.

After public comments concluded, commissioners discussed the item amongst themselves. One asked city manager Steve Palen if the city really could get in legal trouble for violating Belk's will.

While Palen disclaimed he isn't a lawyer, he said technically, Belk's will has already been violated, since it prohibited alcohol consumption on the premises - a practice which he said has since become allowed. He also said to his knowledge, no other developers have expressed interest in the land.

Commissioner Tommie Myers said Wood River voters should have the final say on the issue.

"I still think that it's probably illegal to sell it, I don't think any of it should be sold, and I think that we should have a referendum and bring it to the people - everybody in Wood River - and let them vote on it," Myers said to applause from the crowd.

Ultimately, commissioners voted 9-1 not to forward a positive recommendation to the City Council, with Commissioner Marilyn Maul casting the only vote in favor. The item now moves to the City Council, which meets next on Sept. 5.

A full recording of the Aug. 17 Planning Commission meeting can be watched at the top of this story or on the [Riverbender.com Facebook page](#).

