

The Decatur City Commission made a really important policy decision at Thursday's work session on the budget. Until now, the City has had a "reactive" policy for acquiring parkland, with an emphasis on "donations" (language the City used at the presentation). Not anymore.

The Commissioners clearly stated that the policy should change. The City needs to be more aggressive in acquiring parkland. Commissioners expressed unanimous support for exploring and developing diverse funding mechanisms to address short-term, long-term and opportunistic park needs. It was great.

For several weeks, Decatur park advocates have been struggling to determine the next steps for creating a downtown park (and developing a citywide greenspace plan). On April 18, we formally petitioned the City to acquire part of the Bank of America parking lots for a downtown park. In the weeks that followed, the City denied our petition. A developer put forth plans to turn another 5.25 acres of Downtown into more apartments. Neither event created much optimism for our cause.

That all changed yesterday. We saw that the hundreds - if not thousands - of residents who emailed, sent postcards, attended the April 18 Commission meeting, and spoke up for parks did not do so in vain.

The budget work session began with the City Manager presenting on greenspace and transportation. Regarding greenspace, she repeatedly described City policy as "reactive" and emphasized the importance of donations in expanding greenspace. In regard to funding, she indicated that the City likely could not meet the state criteria for creating one of the more promising options - park impact fees.

An impact fee is a cost imposed on new developments to fund the construction of new facilities needed to serve those developments. A city may need to build more roads, more sidewalks, more parks or more police stations to meet increased demand caused by the developments. So the developer pays a fee to help build those facilities. Research shows that the fee is borne mostly by land speculators – like those folks who bought a Decatur parking lot for a song many years ago and now are sitting on a million dollar asset. Because impact fees decrease the value of the underlying land, they do not impact home prices.

So it was good to see Commissioners Powers and Smith push forward for the impact fees, which resulted in the Commission expressing its unanimous support for funding the study needed to create them. As Commissioner Smith noted, transportation impact fees from the Callaway Building alone would have paid for the study twice over.

It was also good to hear Commissioner Drake asking about selling city assets, including the Conference Center. This year, the City dedicated \$158,000 from the hotel-motel fund to provide for current or future repairs of the facility. The city collected no rent. The city collected no taxes (which would have been about \$80,000). The Conference Center is a depreciating asset that is costing the City \$240,000 a year. We hope that Commissioners will take a really hard look at selling the Conference Center and putting the proceeds into a fund to meet short-term park acquisition needs.

Or maybe the City should knock down the Conference Center and building a park over the underground garage.

Commissioner Boykin seemed to take the lead in emphasizing that it was time to make parks more of a priority. He noted that the City should consider all funding mechanisms. The City may even want to let residents vote to create a new funding stream (tax). Given Decatur's tax rate, residents may not support such a plan. But Commissioner Boykin is to be commended for noting that the City should explore all funding sources and give residents a voice.

The meeting was great. I went from pessimism to optimism over the course of 90 minutes.

So starting today, the City's park acquisition policy is no longer reactive. It has begun in earnest to pursue multiple ways for funding parks. Decatur will have more and better parks. It's just going to take a little time.

Unfortunately, a little time is all we have when it comes to creating a new downtown park. Which is why we have been pushing so hard. The opportunity to create a Downtown park is disappearing. Fast.

600 apartments have filled potential park sites in the past two years. 329 apartments will fill the 5-acre potential park site where the Callaway Building stands (north of the High School). A Hampton Inn will fill the 1-acre potential park site next to the Marriott. Luxury apartments will fill the 5.25-acre potential park site on the east side of Church Street.

Which is why, despite the City denying our petition, we haven't given up on a park at the Bank of America site. Because Downtown Decatur still needs a park. Only a couple possible sites remain. And now the City's policy is to help us get one.