

Park wouldn't be city's duty

City Center's nonprofit owner would put security 'at forefront'

By John Fuddy
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The Downtown park proposed for the site of Columbus City Center mall would be dubbed Columbus Commons, but it wouldn't be maintained by the city.

The mall's nonprofit owner, Capitol South Urban Redevelopment Corp., would be the developer and operator of the park.

"It won't be maintained through city tax dollars," said Amy Taylor, Capitol South's chief operating officer. "There's a misconception that the city will take on responsibility for the park."

The group is committed to a design that "puts security in the forefront," she said in response to citizens' concerns that the park could become a haven for crime.

"An empty, cavernous mall is a bigger security problem than a park. The (park's) layout, landscaping and lighting will be designed with security in mind."

A team of two Columbus police officers on bicycles who patrol the Downtown streets would be among those monitoring the park, said Sgt. Matt Harris, who supervises officers in the Downtown precinct from 3 to 11 p.m.

Since the proposal was revealed Wednesday, comments posted on The Dispatch Web site and callers to talk-radio shows have expressed concerns about the park attracting gangs and the homeless.

But Harris said crime and homelessness aren't significant problems in other Downtown parks.

"We will get calls occasionally of a homeless person sleeping in a park or a homeless person panhandling someone," he said. "It's not an everyday call ... Downtown is not crimeridden."

The park also would lie within the Capital Crossroads District, which assesses more than 500 Downtown property owners to pay for a team of "ambassadors" who pick up litter, answer questions from visitors and alert police to problems. The group also hires off-duty Columbus officers to patrol the district.

"We make sure at all times that we are able to respond to even the most minor offenses," said Cleve Ricksecker, executive director of the district. He expressed confidence that his organization can take on the added responsibility of helping to keep Columbus Commons clean and safe.

Revenue from the neighboring parking garage and underground parking, also owned by Capitol South, would cover the costs of maintaining the park, Taylor said. That revenue pays for maintenance of the mall.

Demolition of the mall and development of the park hinge on the city receiving \$15 million for the project from the federal stimulus package being debated in Washington, Taylor said.

Private developers would finance any retail, housing or office buildings that eventually are built on the outskirts of the 9-acre site.

The president of the residents' association for Waterford Tower, a Downtown condominium building, was relieved to hear that the proposed park wouldn't be maintained by the city's Recreation and Parks Department.

Glenn Kacic said city budget cuts have eliminated landscaping and other maintenance at Bicentennial Park, which is adjacent to the condo tower on the Scioto River.

"Some people question the wisdom of expanding parks when you don't have the money to maintain them," he said.

Based on his organization's experience with Bicentennial Park, Kacic doesn't expect Columbus Commons to attract gangs or the homeless.

"That has not been an issue for us," he said. "We've always looked at the park as a real asset."

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