

Council asked to put bond issue before voters

By DEENA WINTER / Lincoln Journal Star

COUNCIL ASKED TO put BOND ISSUE before voters

The Lincoln City Council will be asked this evening to put a \$2.7 million bond issue on the May 9 primary election ballot.

The money would be used to purchase about 130 acres north of the future South Beltway for a "linear park" similar to the green space north of Nebraska 2 between 17th and 56th streets and Roper Park along Interstate-180.

The council will hold a public hearing on the issue during its meeting tonight, which begins at 5:30 p.m., and will likely vote on the proposal later in the meeting.

The city Parks and Recreation Department is proposing the bond issue to purchase and preserve green space along the South Beltway — a four-lane freeway that will be built south of Lincoln beginning in 2008, with completion expected in five or six years.

The proposed park would be developed after the freeway is completed. The four-and-a-half miles of green space would be north of the beltway between 27th and 84th streets, with potential for ballfields, playgrounds, picnic shelters, landscaping and natural areas.

The \$2.7 million generated by the bonds would cover the cost of the land. Additional costs to develop the trail and park areas would be funded through tax dollars, grants and donations.

Lincoln Parks and Recreation Director Lynn Johnson said time is of the essence because the state Department of Roads is about to begin appraising land and negotiating to buy right of way for the beltway.

If the bond issue is approved, the DOR would also purchase land for the green space at the same time and be reimbursed by the city.

Johnson said voters' approval of the school bond issue Feb. 14 is encouraging.

"To me, that's an indication that Lincoln residents aren't just saying no to bond issues," he said. He said green space improves the aesthetics surrounding a freeway and increases property values.

The last successful bond issue with park improvements was in 1998, Johnson said. A \$75 million bond issue for streets and trails was rejected by voters in 2004.

"I don't know that Lincoln has voted on a bond issue to acquire land before," Johnson said. If the city is going to set aside green space near the beltway, the time is now, he said, because in the past year or so, the price of developable land near the beltway corridor has increased from about \$30,000 an acre to \$60,000 an acre.

The Parks Department and its staffers are not allowed to promote the bond issue, only to provide facts about it, but approval likely will be pushed by a group called Citizens for Quality Parks and Trails.

The group formed last year out of concern that the city's parks and recreation system is not being adequately maintained. It called for a task force to study the issue.

A task force appointed by the mayor recommended that the city establish a schedule of bond issues to develop parks and recreation needs and urged the City Council to make the beltway greenway a priority.

Reach Deena Winter at 473-2642 or dwinter@journalstar.com.

Council has full agenda

What: Lincoln City Council

When: Today, 5:30 p.m.

Where: 555 S. 10th St.

* The council will hear public testimony on Councilman Jon Camp's proposal to end in seven years a policy that bans theaters with more than six screens from being built anywhere other than downtown Lincoln, home of Douglas Theatre Co.'s 14-screen Grand theater. A developer tried to get the policy altered last year to allow a 12- to 18-screen theater to be built at the Prairie Lakes Shopping Center in southeast Lincoln.

* A public hearing will resume on new design standards that would alter the number of trees and shrubs developers would be required to plant in and around some business parking lots and enact a host of other landscape and screening standards.

* A northeast Lincoln development that could include a Wal-Mart Supercenter is back on the agenda for action. The mayor has threatened to veto the development if it includes its originally proposed 230,000-square-foot Wal-Mart. Developer Prairie Homes has been trying to reach a compromise with the mayor's office.

What's a bond issue?

Cities use general obligation bonds to raise money to pay for projects that serve the entire community but don't generate revenue, such as schools, roads, bridges and parks. The bonds are backed by the credit of the city, which raises taxes to repay them.

The \$2.7 million bond issue being proposed here would cost the owner of a \$100,000 home about \$1.60 annually for 20 years.