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Medford City Council revisits possibility of baseball stadium

By Emma Maple of the Daily Courier

MEDFORD — The Medford City Council appears hesitant to pour millions of dollars into a minor league baseball stadium downtown after cost estimates indicated the city would likely have to raise residents' fees or take money from other projects in order to fund the stadium.

Thursday night, Medford Chief Financial Officer Ryan Martin told the council that the city would likely have to raise its parks fee, which is tacked onto utility bills, by $6 a month for several years if it wants to build a minor league baseball stadium to serve as the future home for the Emeralds.

The stadium's preliminary design, developed by Texas-based KNO Construction and presented to the council on Thursday, predicted that a minor league baseball stadium would cost approximately $75.22 million.

Other costs not included in the consultant's report include the cost of outside project management, the cost of relocating a Hawthorne Park playground to make way for a stadium in the park, and the cost of redesigning the area to mitigate traffic and pedestrian impacts, according to Martin.

With those included, Martin predicted the total cost would be about $87.47 million.

Emeralds owner DG Elmore said he would be willing to contribute a maximum of $10 million to the project, leaving it up to the city to cover the remaining amount.

After considering a slew of different options, Martin said the most likely path forward for funding the project would be using future Medford urban renewal dollars, which come from property taxes diverted from city needs like the police and fire department and other taxing districts like Jackson County government, Rogue Community College and Jackson County Library Services.

Other funding sources include raising the city's car rental tax by 2 percentage points, increasing the parks utility fee by $6 a month for several years, and increasing system development charges on new development.

In addition to determining the estimated cost of building a stadium in Hawthorne Park, the city directed KNO Construction to look at the possibility of building a stadium at Harry & David Field on the southern end of town. The consulting firm estimated those costs at around $65 million. Elmore said he would not help pay for a stadium on the outskirts of town and would potentially not choose to relocate his team to Medford if the city chose that location, according to interim City Manager John Vial.

The Emeralds, which currently share a stadium with the University of Oregon baseball team in Eugene, are seeking a new home after updated standards imposed by Major League Baseball on minor league teams put the current location out of compliance.

The team initially sought to build a new $90 million stadium at the Lane County fairgrounds, but struck out after Eugene voters rejected a $15 million bond that would have helped fund the project. Voters crushed the proposal, with 67% opposed and 33% in favor.

The team approached Medford about building a new stadium several years ago, and the city has been debating the merits of the idea ever since. Initially, councilors were hopeful that a baseball stadium could be used to revitalize downtown Medford, but wanted to nail down cost estimates and determine how much money the Emeralds would contribute to the project.

Traditionally, most of the costs for minor league baseball stadiums are borne by governments. A 2025 study by a Georgia university of 134 minor league baseball stadiums found they provide little economic benefit and can financially damage cities that take on the heavy debt load often required for their construction.

Thursday's meeting was the first time the Medford City Council had been presented with a more concrete cost estimate for the project. While discussing the project, most city councilors were wary about increasing residents' fees and pulling money from other city projects to build a stadium.

Councilor John Quinn said that, if a stadium was built, it would take city money from other projects like a conference center, another concept that the city has been exploring for several years. While a conference center would generate tax money for the city, a baseball stadium would not, he added.

Quinn was also concerned about parking. Although the consulting firm identified over 1,000 parking spaces within a half mile that could be used during a baseball game, Quinn said those parking spaces are already used for other businesses and activities and in reality would not always be available.

"I'm a no," he said.

Councilor Mike Kerlinger was also hesitant about the cost impact on residents.

"I don't want to raise fees," he said, adding that he would personally love to see a minor league stadium in town but didn't think the costs were worth it.

"I love baseball, but my duty is not to my passion," Kerlinger said.

Several councilors said although they thought a minor league stadium would improve downtown, they weren't sure it was worth the cost.

Councilor Kevin Stine said that the problem is that there is not a great way to fund the project. If there is a way to find more money that doesn't strain the city's tight budget and raise costs for residents, he said he would be interested in supporting the project. If not, he said the idea should likely be abandoned.

The City Council is on a tight timeline to decide whether to approve the next steps for the project. Major League Baseball has given the Emeralds until April 2029 to find a new home, according to Vial, a timeline that leaves very little flexibility to explore additional questions about the project and still allow time for construction.

Despite the tight timeline, Councilor Nick Card said he wants to explore other ways to pay for the stadium, including seeking state funding or looking for other community partners. Other questions — including who would pay for the stadium's maintenance — also need to be answered, he said.

"These are not small questions," Card said, adding that the answers could sway his vote.

Vial also raised concerns about the cost of caring for the baseball stadium. If the Medford Parks & Recreation Department was expected to care for it without additional revenue it would be a "tremendous burden," he added.

Kerlinger said he agreed that there are more questions that need to be answered, but he thinks there is no time to get those answers.

Procedurally, councilors could not vote on whether to proceed with the project at the Thursday night study session.

During a regular meeting on Wednesday of next week, the City Council will hear comments from the public about the project and hear more information from staff about what an agreement with the Emeralds might look like before voting to "proceed with this project in some fashion," or abandon it altogether, Vial said.

A small group of Medford residents adamantly opposed to the construction of a stadium at Hawthorne Park protested outside of a city event on Monday.

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