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Long-awaited land swap ready to go

HRM will own site of new library

By AMY PUGSLEY FRASER City Hall Reporter

The i's are dotted and the t's ready to be crossed on a land swap between the city and the province involving several key downtown properties.

The exchange, which has been brewing for years, will finally put the future home of a new main library under the ownership of Halifax Regional Municipality.

Getting construction started soon on the flagship library branch is "high up" on council's to-do list, Mayor Peter Kelly said Monday.

"I would hope that this would be one of the main priorities for council."

Mr. Kelly also mentioned other high-priority investments in public transit, public safety and infrastructure needs.

"It's just finding the proper financial approach so it won't become a drain on the operations."

The new library is to be built at the corner of Spring Garden Road and Queen Street, adjacent to the site of the old Halifax Infirmary, which the province tore down in 2005.

A 2004 city staff report on the library said it was crucial to have the new building in place by 2009.

The current library, at Spring Garden Road and Grafton Street, was built in the early 1950s. Over the years, council has OK'd hundreds of thousands of dollars in upgrades, but the building still poses "potential health and public safety liabilities," according to the 2004 report.

The land swap, which will go before a council committee this afternoon and then to the province for cabinet approval, also includes the old Queen Elizabeth High School property on Robie Street. Part of that land has already been used to expand the emergency wing at the new Infirmary, part of the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre.

The Capital district health authority, a provincial body, now wants to take over the rest of the old school property, but a group called Friends of the Halifax Common opposes further development at the site and wants the land returned to public open space.

A staff report on the land swap says many participants at a recent workshop called for the school site to be used strictly as open space. Members of Friends of the Halifax Common will get a chance to tell that to council themselves tonight. The group is listed on the agenda

as making a presentation when the brand new council, elected on Oct. 18, meets tonight for the first time.

The mayor said the city wanted to give the group a chance to voice its concerns publicly.

"This is their opportunity," he said.

It also leaves the door open for further research by city staff, he said.

Also going to the province is the old Birks store site on Barrington Street, which the city has used as a parking lot for the past few years.

At the end of the day, the city will still owe the province about \$2 million, but there's a possibility the city could pay its bill with more land, the mayor said.

Mr. Kelly said other properties are also under review as part of a "long-range program" between the two levels of government. The city might have interest in the Victoria General hospital parking lot on South Park Street "to enhance some of the green space," he said.

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