Written by Jeff Ignatius
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The City of Davenport doesn't own the land on which it would like to build a new west-end library, and the owner of the farmstead – an elderly couple – has said it is unwilling to sell. But city leaders haven't given up on the property yet and are still considering condemning a portion of it. In the meantime, they're also actively looking for another site. Outside of the preferred location, the city is looking at three locations, only one of which it currently owns.

The city council discussed the library issue October 16 in executive session.

Several alderman contacted by the River Cities' Reader were tight-lipped about the meeting, declining to name the land's owner or its address. "I don't talk about what's in executive session," said Ward 5 Alderman Wayne Hean.

The city identified the couple's farmstead near Fairmount Street and Hickory Grove Road, on the south side of Duck Creek, as the ideal location for a new library branch.

But if the owner remains unwilling to sell, the city would need to condemn the property under eminent domain. It's still possible that the city will condemn the eight acres it needs for the branch library, which is a significant portion of the 14 acres owned by the elderly couple.

Davenport Public Library Director Kay K. Runge declined to discuss the specifics of the preferred site, but said the city is aggressively looking elsewhere.

"We're trying to pursue all other sites," Runge said. "We're trying to make something else work." She stressed that no property owners will be forced to give up their dwellings. "It is not our intent to displace anybody from their home, and none of the sites we're considering would do that," she said.

A scenario in which the city would condemn a portion of the elderly couple's land – but not their house – might still sit poorly with the public, and that certainly factors into the decision to look elsewhere.

Runge and members of the city council refused to disclose the locations of the two other pieces of private property that they're considering for the west-end library site.

Ward 2 Alderman George Nickolas proposed a city-owned site just north of the preferred farmstead and west of Fairmount. The planned use for those 23 acres of land is baseball fields. "As soon as they mentioned condemnation of an elderly couple … it threw cold water on me," he said.

Runge said the library is still considering Nickolas' suggestion, but claimed the property is prone to flooding and near a railroad. Nickolas said he was going to ask the Army Corps of Engineers for its opinion. "I think we ought to give it every chance to work," he said.

Compounding the sensitive public-relations question of condemnation is the political wrangling that inevitably goes along with the siting process. Nickolas said some aldermen have an "it's got to be in my backyard" philosophy toward the siting of the library branches.

Ward 1 Alderman Roxanna Moritz said finding a site on the west side of Davenport has been a challenge. “We’re looking at lots of locations,” she said. “The trouble is finding eight acres. … Each site seems to bring a set of problems.”

“We keep looking at sites and scratching them off,” Hean said.

When asked whether she would support a west-side library site in the ward of Alderman Nickolas or Ray Ambrose, Moritz replied, “Absolutely.”

“We’ve walked virtually every inch of ground on the west side,” Runge said. “Siting is the toughest thing.”

While the city is trying to move forward with the west-side facility, discussions about a new eastern library branch are on hold until a decision is made about what to do with the city-owned property at Eastern Avenue and 53rd Street. A branch library, originally slated to be built at Tremont Avenue and 46th Street, was included in the mixed-use development plans at Eastern and 53rd, which are not likely to go forward.

While everyone agrees that the west side of Davenport deserves and needs a branch library, the need for an east-side library is less clear. The city plans to shut down the Annie Wittenmeyer branch of the library on Eastern Avenue because of its condition, and an east-side library would replace it, Runge said.

But the Bettendorf Public Library, on the west side of the city, already serves much of eastern Davenport. In its last fiscal year, which ended June 30, Davenport residents checked out 27 percent of the library’s circulated materials. (Residents outside of Bettendorf accounted for 42 percent of circulation.)

“We kind of view it as a compliment,” said Director Faye Clow. “We speak of it with pride.”

But that use is a stress on the library’s resources. “We do scramble to write grants and beef up our materials budget,” Clow said. But “I think we do a really good job of meeting it [the demand].”

The priority now appears to be a west-side library for Davenport, and there’s a sense of urgency among the people pushing for the project. “I just want to see it get sited,” Moritz said, a sentiment echoed by Runge and Hean.

“Out of the ground within a year,” Runge said.

“This is something I want done in my term of office,” Hean said.