

NEWS

Residents vow to stop Kent's Pine Tree Park sale



Kent residents let city staff and officials know on Thursday night at Pine Tree Elementary School that they oppose the city's sale of Pine Tree Park. — Image Credit: STEVE HUNTER, Kent Reporter

by [STEVE HUNTER](#), Kent Reporter Courts, Government Reporter
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Kent residents plan to fight city hall to save a city park.

Nearly 60 Pine Tree Park neighbors and supporters let city officials know at a public meeting Thursday night at Pine Tree Elementary School that they still hope to stop through litigation the city's \$2 million sale of the 10-acre park to a developer who wants to build 64 homes on the site combined with 4 acres next door that the Kent School District sold.

"It's not a done deal, we are not going to let it happen," said a Kent man who doesn't live next to the park but supports the movement to keep the neighborhood park.

City officials called the meeting after word spread last month that Kent had sold the property in September after an executive session to Kirkland-based Oakpointe Communities. The city failed to notify neighbors about the sale. They found out when a city sign went up about the planned development.

Residents criticized city officials for how they handled the sale. One gentleman said it makes them "untrustworthy" and he doubts whether the proceeds from the sale would be used for park land elsewhere, especially if there is another city budget crisis.

"We understand the trust issue," said Derek Matheson, city chief administrative officer. "We acknowledge that we did not handle this the right way."

That comment led to shouts from the crowd for the city to start the process over. One man said it's fine if private property owners want to sell to developers but the city shouldn't sell one of its parks for a developer to build new houses.

City Park Director Jeff Watling, who led the meeting, emphasized that the City Council several years ago asked city staff to find any property it could sell because of financial losses the city took during the recession. He said this park near south of South 277th Street and east of 114th Avenue Southeast

has limited access and became a property to put up for sale. He said no other parks are up for sale.

"Is that asset best served there on a public scale that serves a limited benefit or should we take the proceeds and invest somewhere else in system that will have a broader - and I'm not saying better or worse - but a broader public value," Watling said. "We are not making these decisions in a time of prosperity, we are in a bit of a scarcity in the city."

Most at the meeting were upset the city doesn't have any specific plans about how the proceeds of the Pine Tree Park sale will be spent. Watling said the city has plans to purchase properties next to Clark Lake Park, Mill Creek Earthworks Park and Morrill Meadows Park in an effort to enlarge those parks, but no decision has been made about where the funds would go. The council will make that final decision.

Residents near Pine Tree Park were disappointed because none of those parks are near them.

People asked city staff if the sale is even legal since Kent received the property from King County. The county had bought the site through a Forward Thrust measure passed by voters in the late 1960s to create more parks and open space as development spread. The city annexed land in the 1990s that included the park, which the county turned over to the city.

Watling said the park can be sold as long as proceeds are used to acquire other property for parks. He said city staff checked with King County staff prior to the sale to make sure it could be done.

Others at the meeting called for the city to back out of the sale since they now know neighbors want to keep the land as a park. The park has numerous pine trees, a few walking trails and deer are spotted running across it or grazing in it.

"We have a binding purchase agreement to sell the property," Matheson said. "It is lawful to sell the park and reinvest the proceeds to parks of equal or greater value."

That caused one woman to shout, "Without public input? Is that in there?"

Kristy Herrick, who lives across the street from the park and has spearheaded the drive to save it, said litigation appears to be the only step left.

"We're going to keep plugging on it but unfortunately we don't have a lot of time since they didn't tell us about it (until last month)," Herrick said after the meeting. "I think most people don't want to lose the park and the fact they did it the way they did just rubs salt in the wounds. It's just not right at all."

Herrick is working to find an attorney to take on the case. When people entered the school for the meeting, a sign greeted them that an account would be set up at gofundme.com under Save Pine Tree Park to help pay for litigation.

"The only thing you can do is go to court," one man told Herrick.

Herrick said the meeting turned out to be the city doing damage control. She's trying to fight city hall, but knows it won't be easy.

"They're all scrambling," she said of city officials. "But I'm afraid they are better scramblers than we are."

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