

## The Linking Letter

by Anne Scheck

Vol 3, Issue 3 July 5, 2016

A brief report about City Council action on “Independence Landing” at the meeting on June 28, followed by an editorial. (Info on a great new coffee house-plus-tavern is at bottom).

***Preface:*** Far more money is needed to prepare the riverside parcel known as “Independence Landing,” to pay for the construction of water and sewer lines at the site. So far, the city has invested about \$1.4 million to acquire the land and to grade it, as well as hiring a consultant to attract investment.

**Question:** How will the city provide the significant sum of money to complete the “Independence Landing” pre-development project?

The price tag for new work to get “Independence Landing” shovel ready -- estimated to cost up to \$5 million -- will require a “substantial amendment” to the city’s urban renewal plan. The amendment is needed to be able to allocate the rest of the revenue for the project.

The proposed amendment was met with concern by a majority of the City Council last week, which had re-convened as the Independence Urban Renewal Agency after ending the council meeting. Led by City Councilor Marilyn Morton, three of the five council members expressed dismay that they hadn’t received information on this proposed amendment until shortly before the meeting. This left them little time to analyze the material, they said.

Councilor Morton observed that city staff seemed to expect a “rubber stamp” from the council on the plan, which she said needed far more discussion and explanation. “Lose the ambiguity,” she advised City Manager David Clyne.

“What we are asking today is to initiate the process,” not approve it, explained Mr. Clyne. Final approval will require at least two public hearings – one by the planning commission, the other by the council, he added.

If not for the reassurance that there would be more chance to evaluate the proposed amendment, “we would be voting no,” said Councilor Nancy Lodge. E-mailing the documents in advance of the meeting would have helped, said Councilor Tom Takacs.

“I prefer not to vote,” Councilor Morton said before the motion carried. The proposed amendment will now go to the planning commission.

The meeting appeared to mark the first time the city councilors publicly disagreed on a vote. Neither Councilor Peck nor Mayor John McArdle responded directly to concerns voiced by the other three

councilors, though the mayor reiterated that the vote was only to initiate the process. In the past, Mayor McArdle has advocated for actions to make “Independence Landing” desirable for developers, often citing its centerpiece – a hotel – as long overdue for the city. (Councilor Peck did not reply to follow-up requests by email seeking his opinion.)

No developer has surfaced to strike a deal for the parcel, despite the city’s contract with Portland-area Tokala Properties, which Independence and Tokala entered into late last year to entice investment. Street-scaping and water lines now seem a likely part of the package.

However, any project requiring more than \$1 million has to be considered for a “substantial amendment” to the city’s urban renewal plan. If the amendment fails, the Urban Renewal District – under which “Independence Landing” is being offered for development -- will be unable to fund any more costs associated it.

Debt for the project is to be repaid by tax revenues from the development once it is built, through a program of tax-increment financing (TIF). US cities often rely on this form of funding for under-developed or blighted areas in need of improvement – TIF allows cities to borrow against future taxation that will accrue from robust redevelopment.

***Editorial:***

There is a lot to be proud of in Independence, and I’m reminded of that every year as the 4<sup>th</sup> of July rolls around and our community bands together to create a night-lighting spectacle that’s the envy of many in the Pacific Northwest. “What’s it like to live here?” a Canadian tourist asked me as I stood in a throng downtown, drinking coffee.

The man from Canada told me he’d met only friendly merchants and residents in our picturesque town, a place that seemed as American as apple pie.

I didn’t say so, but my thoughts about our great American life had occurred days before – and had nothing to do with pie or fireworks.

Watching a trio of our city councilors as they struggled to understand why they aren’t getting the answers they think they need from our local government was an event as star-spangled as any anthem.

The incredible freedom to speak out, to investigate, to prod and to question the actions of city leadership without fear of retaliation and with the presumption of spurring action is so steeped in our American way of life that it's easy to forget.

But I was jogged into renewed appreciation of it in an otherwise empty council-chamber gallery. I watched as Councilor Morton, seemingly as amenable as any individual on the planet, resolved to get to the bottom of things. Councilor Takacs, who always seems equally agreeable, couldn't contain himself from noting a \$5 million price estimate was on a memo he'd only recently been given. Councilor Lodge, who often seems a most encouraging presence to city staff, appeared uncharacteristically reluctant about the meeting packet she'd just received.

They didn't dramatize the situation, with barbs or zingers. They aired only concern. There were no loud voices – only polite questions.

But this was yankee thunder -- the kind without sparklers and parades. It was the sound of a small group of people exercising their right to be informed about matters upon which they will vote, in an effort to make the wisest choice for the benefit of the people who elected them. There was no brass band, but I think they deserved one. –end-

*A FINAL NOTE: "Brew" opened! It's the corner of Main Street next door to Ovenbird Bakery, and it's both a coffee and tap house (depending on time of day & personal preference). Serving breakfast, lunch and dinner. Seating is both indoors or on the river-viewing patio. Coffee is scrumptious! Owners Mitch & Cathy Teal are friendly and determined. Both are alums of Western Oregon University (they got business degrees in the 1980s). A nice place!*