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Council Oks Middleford Commons

By Meg Landers
Mail Tribune

The Medford City Council committed to the controversial Middleford Commons late Thursday, following what council members describe as two years of 60-plus private and public meetings.

The council voted 5-1 in favor of the disposition and development agreement, making it the second entity in a three-way partnership to sign on to the massive urban redevelopment project.

The move comes the day after the MURA board approved the agreement.

Mark Rivers, the Boise, Idaho, project developer, said Lithia will sign the DDA in "a matter of days." The ambitious downtown project will be located between Central and Riverside avenues and Third and Sixth streets, with Lithia's 10-story headquarters as the anchor.

About 30 people attended the evening council meeting, and among those who spoke was Medford resident Ben Truwe, a City Council candidate in the November election.

"I'd like to know what the hurry is," said Truwe. Among his concerns was the possible demolition of two historic Frank Clark buildings as well as the 80-year-old Sam Jennings building.



"If you weren't in such a hurry you could negotiate those buildings," he said.

Medford resident Lee Morris, another council candidate, also objected.

"It has the flavor of gambling," he said. "I don't mind some people going to Reno, I just think they should take their own money."

He said the project had too many risks.

"If you roll the dice, guess who pays? We do. Crappy idea."

Brad Hicks and Steve Gilmore from the Chamber of Medford/Jackson County said the project will create hundreds of jobs and will revamp what is about to become abandoned car lots as Lithia car dealerships relocate near the Medford airport.

"Those other businesses around it are going to benefit from it as well," said Gilmore. "I encourage you to not only support the project but to move on it tonight."

Councilman John Statler, who cast the dissenting vote, repeated a concern he's brought up at past meetings.

"I'm still missing that market study," he said. "Why aren't I getting that?"

He said he worried about committing \$14.1 million in public funds to a project that the area may not support.

Bill Hoke, deputy city manager and economic developer, said \$14.1 million was not at risk.

"Between two and three million is probably what we're looking at for the property acquisitions. If Lithia fails to perform ... we're not obligated to put any more money in."

Councilman Jim Kuntz said approving the document does not make it a done deal.

"There's going to be several more steps of government before they turn a shovel," he said.

Kuntz said he had no doubt that Lithia had done its own studies.

"Lithia Corporation is going to spend about \$100 million on this project. If they fail at this, the stock holders are going to throw them out."

Following the council vote, Lithia President Bryan DeBoer said it's taken two years to get to this point, and there's a lot yet to do.

"This is where the hard work begins," he said.