

Local team lobbies for release of \$4.7M for Riverwalk

By Bill Kirk

bkirk@eagletribune.com

January 17, 2009 12:00 am

LAWRENCE — A team of local leaders left a Statehouse meeting with hope, but no promises, that \$4.7 million in approved funding for the Riverwalk may finally be released.

The Riverwalk, a proposed hiking and biking trail along the Merrimack River, has languished due to stalled funding, which has been approved but not released by Gov. Deval Patrick's administration.

Political, business and nonprofit leaders from Lawrence met with the governor's administration and finance team earlier this week to make an appeal for the bond funding for the project.

"It was a very productive meeting," said Sen. Susan Tucker, D-Andover, a longtime advocate for the project.

However, she added, "There were no promises."

Tucker said city and local legislators, along with mill developer and pizza restaurant owner Sal Lupoli, stressed to members of the finance team how important the project is to Lawrence's future.

"This is a public/private partnership to benefit the people who work, live and play in the city, and for people from all over the Merrimack Valley to enjoy the river," Tucker said.

The Riverwalk project has a number of proposed features, including a recreational path running from Interstate 495 to the Great Stone Dam along the river.

Groundwork Lawrence Executive Director Kate O'Brien, whose nonprofit agency is spearheading the project, said with political will and community interest in place, money is the only thing blocking progress.

"It's just a matter of dollars and cents," she said, noting that the money would come from a bond bill for capital projects and not the state operating budget, which is being trimmed due to the tough economy.

She said at the meeting state officials held out hope for funding from the economic stimulus package proposed by President-elect Barack Obama.

O'Brien said her organization needs \$1.5 million to finish design and construction of the Riverwalk on the south side of the river, while the remaining \$3.2 million is needed for the north side.

Lupoli said that as a private land owner, he would help maintain the paved, 12-foot-wide path in front of his Merrimack Street property, while also providing access to it through his site.

He also has said he will build a 2,000-square-foot community center on his Merrimack Street property, which the city could operate with services like bike rentals, for instance. And he proposed a 25,000-square-foot park on his property near the walking path.

Lupoli pointed out that Enel, an energy company that bought the Essex Company and its hydroelectric power plant at the Great Stone Dam, would need to be onboard for the project. Essex Company and Enel own much of the land along the river and canals, he said. In addition, the Greater Lawrence Sanitary District has an easement along the river and a sewer line running under the site of the proposed path, so that agency also must approve work along the river's edge.

Copyright © 1999-2008 cnhi, inc.

http://www.eagletribune.com/punews/local_story_016234500.html/resources_printstory