

Denver parks officials endorse controversial land swap deal with developer for pocket park

Jon Murray

The Denver parks department signed off Wednesday on a controversial land swap with a developer that will affect the placement of a long-discussed pocket park.

If the deal is approved by the City Council, developer HM Capital would give the city about \$650,000 for the design and construction of a city park on a roughly 0.35-acre parcel HM owns on Fairfax Street, south of East 29th Avenue.

In exchange, Denver Parks and Recreation would transfer a city-owned property of similar size across the street — bought with intentions of building a park — to HM for potential redevelopment. The parks department announced its decision in an email to Park Hill community contacts in the late afternoon.

What has rankled some community and park advocates is that the land-swap proposal would result in a park set between HM Capital's planned new residential and office buildings and restaurants. Plans for Park Hill Commons [have referred to the park as The Square](#), signaling HM's hope to integrate the park into its development.

"As many in the Park Hill neighborhood have long understood, this area of town is a 'park desert' where many residents have over a 10-minute walk to the nearest park," says the Parks and Rec announcement. "This decision will save taxpayer dollars and expedite the creation of a neighborhood park for you and your family."

The city bought its property — a former Xcel substation — in 2015, intending to use it for a small park on the west side of Fairfax once funding was budgeted. HM Capital's offered parcel for the park is on the east side of the street, closer to midblock.



Image from Denver parks presentation

A satellite image, oriented with east at top, shows where Developer HM Capital has proposed to place a pocket park (marked 2) on the side of the block it's developing. In exchange, the city would give HM a similar-sized parcel it owns (1) that was acquired three years ago for a future park.

The city's announcement cites support for the land-swap option from Councilman Chris Herndon and from most participants in recent community meetings.

Critics, though, have protested the idea for more than a year. They have raised gentrification concerns and complaints about developer influence over city decision-making. Herndon, who represents the area, has been a frequent target of ire.

Opponents last week raised new suspicions over the recent revelation, reported by [the Greater Park Hill News](#), that the city's real estate director signed a letter of intent in early November to proceed on the land swap. That letter was nonbinding, and a parks department spokeswoman said this week that officials decided soon after to pause consideration of the swap so they could seek more community input.

The Greater Park Hill Community group opposed the land swap in November.

Members of the neighborhood group "are frustrated with the city's disregard for the process and lack of transparency and engagement," wrote Blair Taylor, a GPHC leader, in an email earlier this week to Parks and Recreation planning director Gordon Robertson.

An early proposal called for HM Capital to build the park and then turn it over to the city. But parks officials now say that the city will oversee the project and that the community — not the developer — will decide on the park's amenities and layout, building on input given in the recent meetings.

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