

Land swap for Sisterhood

By Scott Christiansen

If you take a map of the Spenard Community Council's boundaries and turn it until the northern boundary is at the bottom and the southern boundary is up top, you'll get a shape that looks a bit like a gun. Spenard has a problem. It's near where the gun's barrel meets the stock, if you've imagined an assault rifle. If you see a revolver, it's close to where the shooter places their thumb on the hammer.

There's a mix of industrial, residential and public parks land cobbled together on the neighborhood's southern boundary. Thousands of Anchorageites drive by here every day. To them, viewing it from Minnesota Drive or International Airport Road, it's a blurry mix of roofs, railroad tracks and the tops of trucks.

Inside that cobbled-together mix of development is a place called Sisterhood Park and on April 6 a lot of people who may have never heard of Sisterhood Park, or who may not know any kids who kick soccer balls, ride skateboards or swing bats in the park, will be asked to vote on a land exchange to change the park's shape.

"There's a trucking company, a couple of them, back there," says René Haag, chair of Spenard Community Council. "The land swap would help to keep those trucks from going through the neighborhood, so this is something the community council supports."

All the voters in Anchorage will be asked to approve the exchange. That's because the land swap involves moving public land to private ownership, and the Anchorage Assembly doesn't approve those things on its own. The politicians are not just being spineless; the city has an ordinance that specifically prohibits them from transferring or selling dedicated parkland without voter approval.

The immediate problem—the one voters will be asked to help resolve by approving the land swap—is that the hodge-podge neighborhood that includes Northwood Elementary School, the Spenard Recreation Center and Sisterhood Park also includes those large trucks. Add to that on-street parking for people who drive to the park. Planners have concocted a new traffic plan, and they want to place a soccer field on property now held by a trucking company, called Orbus, Inc., a subsidiary of American Fast Freight. The company would get a slightly bigger slice of land that is now part of the park (2.77 acres in exchange for 2.73).

The idea is that in a future version of Spenard, big trucks and neighborhood traffic won't mix as often as they do on Van Buren Street right now. The city also says more off-street parking would be built. The community council, the Anchorage School District and the bond-boosters at Anchorage Tomorrow, a political arm of the local construction industry, all support the plan.

The ballot language says the swap costs taxpayers nothing, and the assembly approved an ordinance that says the same thing. That's true, but it doesn't mean the city isn't spending money in the neighborhood. One adjacent construction project called "Taft Street and Van Buren Street Improvements" is already in the design phase and has its own web site hosted by the engineering contractor Dowl HKM (Info at <http://tinyurl.com/Dowl-northwood>).

The assembly also accepted a summary of economic effects, which found the Sisterhood Park land swap would have "no private sector economic effects"—a statement that seems to illustrate what a clumsy tool "economic effects" are for describing many of the benefits and drawbacks of a project. It's

hard to quantify some negatives—traffic hazards, diesel smoke on a ball field or a mix of park users and industrial traffic—in economic terms. And to quantifying the positive stuff, too, such as an assist to the open man and bicycle kick to the goal on a soccer field.

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