Fundraising Kicks Off For City Park

By NOLAN STOUT
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HARRISONBURG — A long-discussed park in downtown Harrisonburg is one step closer to reality.

The Build Our Park committee kicked off a fundraising campaign Wednesday for the proposed park behind the city's municipal building.

Around 80 people packed Pale Fire Brewing Co. as Bob Hill, who has led the committee's fundraising effort, announced $500,000 already has been raised for the project.

Hill said raising the funds wasn't hard because of the "enthusiasm that this generated." "Everyone wanted to get involved," he said. The estimated $5.5 million park would be built at the municipal lot on South Liberty Street, which includes the Harrisonburg Farmers Market's Turner Pavilion, the grassy area adjacent to the parking lot and the property across Warren Street. The proposal also calls for closing Warren Street. The park would cover about 4.2 acres of city-owned land. Plans also call for Turner Pavilion to be expanded and the addition of a playground, splash pad and tree-lined promenade. The proposal also calls for a grassy lawn south of the pavilion to host events.

Mary Ann Alger, the committee's treasurer, said a park can help create a vibrant downtown, which is a benefit to the larger community. "If the downtown is dead," she said, "it's certainly a turnoff for the community." The committee was awarded a $99,500 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Business Development Grant program earlier this year to expand Turner Pavilion.

Most of the funding, according to organizers, will come from private sources.

Proponents have said the park would be a point of civic pride, helping to increase development and draw more people downtown.

In 2011, Dave Miller, one of the project's chief proponents and the previous owner of Dave's Taverna, presented a proposal for the park to Harrisonburg City Council. Miller estimated it would cost $7.5 million to build, with the city only contributing $500,000 and the rest coming from private money.

The estimated cost decreased in April 2011 after the committee contracted with consulting firms. The Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance has been a partner in the project and created the Plan Our Park committee in 2011 to pursue the park proposal. Andy Perrine, president of HDR's board, said the committee changed its name in June when council included the park in its capital improvement plan. The city, which signed off on the plan in June but has not allocated any funding, is expected to for fiscal 2018 that starts July 1.

Perrine said the size of the project has decreased since it was first introduced in 2011 and the cost could change. “Ultimately, it could be less, it could be more,” he said. Alger said Washington, D.C.-based HR& A Advisors conducted an economic impact study of the park and estimated it would bring 40,000 to 60,000 more visitors downtown annually and generate $310,000 to $425,000 in spending.

Jared Burden, a member of the committee, said Build Our Park is in the process of becoming a nonprofit corporation under than name Downtown Harrisonburg Park Inc. Alger said the nonprofit would continually raise funds for the park’s management.

Perrine said construction is expected to start in 2017 and finish by 2020.

“We’ve got a lot going on in Harrisonburg,” Alger said, “and I think this park is going to continue us on that trajectory.”

The committee is offering naming rights to the park for $500,000.

Residents can donate any amount to the project. To donate, call 432-3863.

Concepts and a project overview can be viewed at www.buildourpark.org.

Contact Nolan Stout at 574-6278 or nstout@dnronline.com