

Public funding for Little Chute windmill draws criticism

Residents push for hearing to gauge support level

By J.E. Espino

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LITTLE CHUTE — Village resident Jim Killian has nothing against a community group's plans to raise \$2.5 million for a Dutch windmill and visitor center as long as tax dollars aren't involved.

Much to his displeasure, that is the direction village officials plan to take when they meet next Wednesday to act on a resolution to commit \$500,000 to the Little Chute Windmill Inc. project.

"It was always supposed to be a private entity, and now it's turned into this public funding" project, said Killian, who with another resident, Dennis Zornow, objected to the proposal introduced Wednesday during a Village Board meeting.

The windmill is \$900,000 short of its goal. With village funding, the windmill organization is free to relocate its project to Island Park along the Fox River and sell its property in the 100 block of Main Street. Windmill parts would be ordered from Holland in 2008 and construction would likely begin in 2009 so that opening is in 2010.

A majority of village leaders appear to support the grant for economic reasons, though critics insist the board instead should call a public hearing to gauge community support for the windmill project.

"Don't you think the public deserves the right to get more information on this?" asked Trustee Brian Joosten, challenging the rest of the board.

Village Administrator Chuck Kell says officials may want to invest in a windmill at the park to save the village from the cost of replacing the inoperable Mill Street bridge. Estimates place the cost of a pedestrian bridge at \$1 million to \$2 million. A vehicular bridge is \$5 million to \$6 million, but funding may be available through the state Department of Transportation.

"Sometimes you've got to spend money to save money," said Trustee Judd Vanden Heuvel. "Without access nothing is going to happen down there. It's going sit exactly like it is and grow weeds. With the bridge there, perhaps the windmill and visitor center, who knows?"

Already, the DOT has given the village a green light to hire a consultant to design a bridge. Whether funding in the 2009 cycle is available for the project will be announced some time early next year, Kell said.

Little Chute Windmill Inc. would decide at that point whether to relocate to the 5.8-acre park.

A marketing plan released this year shows the windmill could draw 22,000 to 25,000 visitors annually. Officials say the project can be a vehicle for business development along the river. They see the possibility of following the footsteps of Neenah and its Riverwalk project if the underpinnings are in place.

"I know for a fact the tourism bureau wouldn't have put up \$150,000 if they didn't expect to bus every group of people that has a convention in Appleton over here to see that (windmill)," Vanden Heuvel said. "And while they are here, they are going to spend some money."

To that end, Advance Little Chute, a group representing local businesses, has invited Robert Buckingham, Neenah's community development director, and Karen Harkness, Future Neenah Inc. executive director, to speak to business owners Tuesday during a breakfast meeting.

"We're hoping to use their experience to have a real solid foundation that we can grown on," said Trustee Janet Verstegen.

Concerns about whether the project can deliver the same results in Little Chute are understood, said Village President Chuck Fischer. "I can just see in the future that area becoming kind of a gem along the Fox Valley and the Fox Cities. I think the possibilities are almost limitless. I just would hate us not giving this a shot."