



# Linn County NEWS



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## Linn County to aid SH homeless project with property

**S**WEET HOME — Linn County will give the city of Sweet Home two acres from the former Willamette Industries mill site to support development of a homeless project, but will likely put up for auction the remaining 148 acres of the property it was decided Tuesday night in a joint meeting of commissioners and city councilors.

The two elected bodies met at Sweet Home City Hall to talk about the two key issues.

Like other communities across the state, Sweet Home has been grappling with the issue of homelessness and at one point, had allowed volunteers to build platforms near a local church on which people could place tents.

City councilors pointed out that homeless people have gravitated into the downtown business area, sleeping in doorways or bus stop shelters. It has caused health and safety concerns.

Volunteers and city officials recently visited Walla Walla, Washington, where the Walla Walla Alliance for the Homeless has been successful in developing a program to assist the homeless.

Sweet Home hopes to use information gleaned from that visit to develop a central site where homeless people can be safe, receive assistance and transition back into society.

The city and the Family Assistance and Resource Center Group has already compiled a policy manual that outlines rules for those who will use the site.

Council members suggested the county could lease the property to the city, but the commissioners said they would prefer



*Linn County Commissioners Roger Nyquist, Sherrie Sprenger and Will Tucker met jointly with members of the Sweet Home City Council Tuesday evening to discuss the community's homeless project and the former Willamette*

to give the land to the city.

Commissioner Will Tucker said he supported the proposal, but added that he wanted the site to be big enough so that all vehicles could be parked within a fenced area and not spread out in a neighborhood. He suggested the city ask for enough property to ensure a long-term program.

All agreed that the winter months and cold weather are near and it's time to move forward with the project.

"We know this won't be a walk in the park," City Manager Ray Towry said. "But the impact of homelessness on our community is too great to ignore. Homelessness is a wicked, wicked issue."

The site will also include development of a county-operated RV dump facility.

The county has dealt with the issue of disposing of the former Willamette Industries mill site since foreclosing on the property a dozen years ago due to more than \$500,000 in unpaid property

taxes by Western States Land Reliance Trust, a failed housing development.

Linn County has worked with former owner Weyerhaeuser, as well as the Department of Environmental Quality, on targeting any environmental issues on the site and mitigating them.

Linn County has offered to give the property to the city of Sweet Home, but city officials are concerned that certain protections from expensive environmental cleanup actions, might not be available once property ownership is transferred.

After lengthy discussion, commissioners Roger Nyquist, Sherrie Sprenger and Will Tucker asked if the city would prefer the county put the property up for auction and sell it to the highest bidder. The county had recently put the property up for auction, but a purchase agreement would include a long-term plan that would outline how development would benefit the city of Sweet Home.

All four bids were rejected by the commissioners.

City staff suggested Sweet Home could pay for a Master Plan of the site, which could take six months.

But the commissioners said such a plan could be appealed under the state's land use laws and the process could drag out into a year or more.

The commissioners are concerned that a vibrant housing market and favorable interest rates may not last and believe now is the time to market the property.

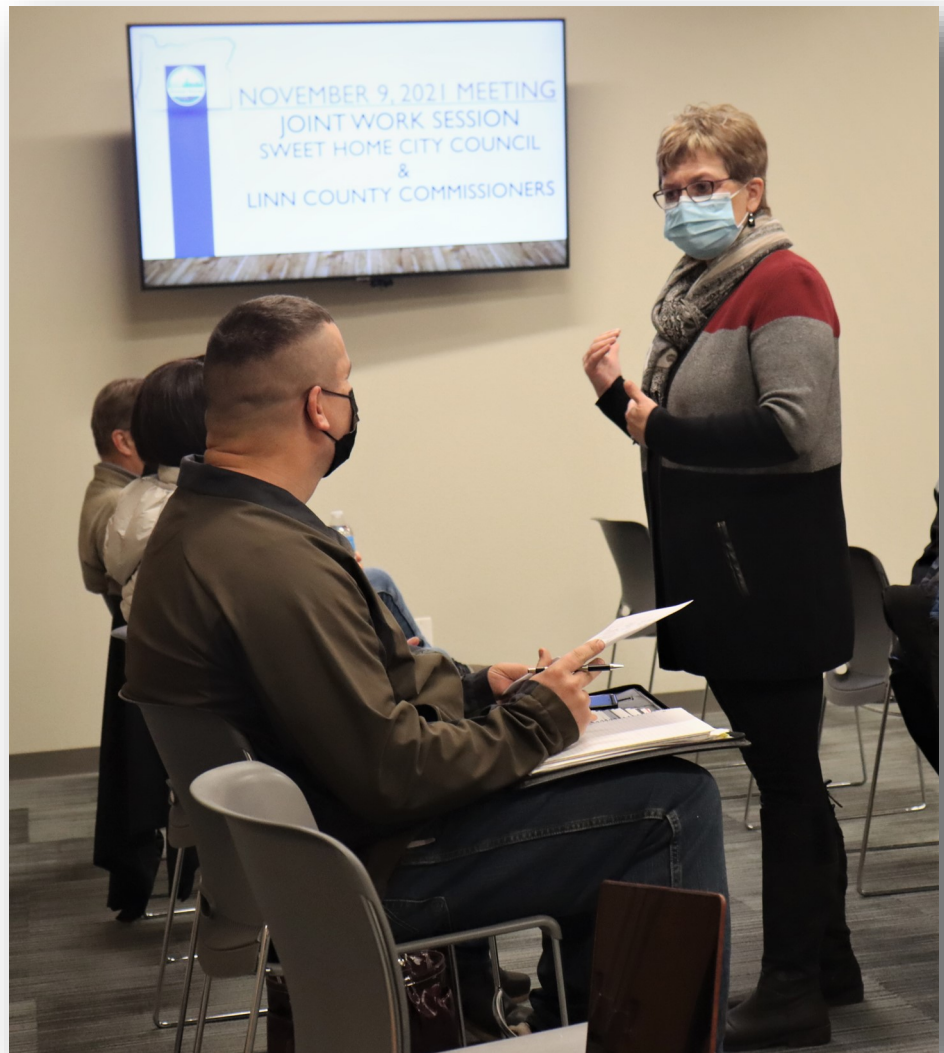
"The market is hot now, the opportunity is now," Nyquist said. "I feel like if we put it up for auction, someone will buy it and it will have a positive impact on the community. The value of this property is more than its cleanup costs in today's market."

Several pieces of the property have qualified for "No Further Action" classification from the DEQ, but issues surrounding a former log pond and asbestos in buildings remain to be dealt with.

Commissioner Tucker said he favors selling off portions of the property that already received environmental clearance from the DEQ.

The county could have the property available for auction within 30 days.

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*Linn County Commissioner Sherrie Sprenger talks with Tristan Davis of the Linn County Parks Department prior to Tuesday night's joint meet of the Board of Commissioners and the Sweet Home City Council.*

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