

EDITORIAL

City can correct past mistake and help library

Norwalk officials made an expensive mistake two years ago when they let the land next to the Main Library on Belden Avenue go to a developer, Jason Milligan, to put up a 69-unit apartment building.

Milligan paid \$2.5 million for the 1.25-acre property. The city now has an opportunity to purchase a six-year option to buy it at a fixed price of \$4.88 million. That option, too, is expensive: \$460,000.

In the short-term, the library gains 28 much-needed parking spaces in the private lot owned by Milligan. Plans call for the lot to be reconfigured to provide between 39 and 50 (very expensive) spaces.

The deal, brokered by former Mayor Alex Knopp, chairman of the Norwalk Public Library Board of Trustees, has already cleared the Council Land Use Committee, the Planning Commission, and the Parking Authority. Its next airing comes Monday before the Board of Estimate and Taxation. The full 15-member Common Council will vote on it the following night. Ten votes are required for the proposal to pass.

Even for the many Norwalk residents who support the deal, a certain degree of ambivalence is unavoidable. As at-large Republican Councilman Richard Bonenfant, the Land Use Committee's lone "no" vote, put it: "If you say, 'Do you want more parking at the library?' everybody is going to say, 'Sure...'

"But on the other hand, when I ask people, 'How do you feel about somebody who bought a property for \$2.5 million two years ago and he's selling it back to you at \$5 million,' not too many people get enthused."

That's understandable. Still, the mistake was the city's not Milligan's, and a no vote would only compound the error. The apartment project, already green-lit by the Norwalk Zoning Commission, would go up on the site, and the opportunity to expand the library would be lost. If the council votes yes, on the other hand, the apartment project would be withdrawn and the land left undeveloped for six years, freezing the purchase price at \$4.88 million.

The historic 1902 Carnegie Library, last expanded in 1982, is overdue for restoration and modernization. Even so, its popularity is on the rise. Norwalk Public Library Director Christine Bradley says usage has grown 70 percent, to 533,224 visitors — this despite the chronic shortage of parking.

Further growth is expected this fall when for the first time every Norwalk school student will receive an application for a library card. According to Knopp, 33,000 Norwalkers already have them.

Modern libraries are community centers and gathering places that bring people together not only to borrow books but to hear speakers, expand knowledge, discuss ideas, and access information. A revitalized library would give the redeveloping downtown district an intellectual heartbeat that would contribute to its livability and appeal.

The place to accomplish all that is on Belden Avenue, where the existing library now sits. Yes, it will be costly, but not as costly as doing nothing.

The city has a chance to undo a past blunder. We hope they take it.