

STAMFORD

City wants groups to oversee park, Old Town Hall

By Donna Porstner
Staff Writer

STAMFORD — Residents are invited to voice their opinions on plans to transfer oversight of Mill River Park and Old Town Hall to separate organizations at a public hearing tomorrow night.

The city plans to transfer ownership of the former city hall at 175 Atlantic St. to the Old Town Hall Redevelopment Agency, a limited liability corporation that will sell tax credits to finance the final stage of a major restoration project.

The agency plans to raise \$6 million of the \$16 million needed to finish the long-awaited renovation of the city landmark. The building, which has been vacant for about 20 years, is expected to reopen in spring 2009 as an office for 80 employees of National Realty and De-

Chance to speak out

The Board of Representatives' Land Use/Urban Redevelopment Committee will discuss the Old Town Hall and Mill River Park proposals at 7 p.m. tomorrow at the Stamford Government Center.

velopment Corp.'s equity arm, which owns the Lord & Taylor and Linens & Things retail chains.

At the same meeting, scheduled for 7 p.m. at the Stamford Government Center, the Board of Representatives' Land Use/Urban Redevelopment Committee is soliciting feedback on plans to transfer oversight of Mill River Park to a private organization.

City officials are modeling the arrangement with the Mill River Collaborative after New York City Department of Parks & Recreation's relationship with the Central Park Conservancy, which oversees the world-famous park. The conservancy raises 85 percent of Central Park's \$25 million annual operating budget.

Under a proposed management agreement, the Mill River Collaborative would supplement Stamford's investment in the downtown park with private funds. The city and collaborative would contribute at least \$200,000 each toward maintenance costs.

The collaborative would be allowed to raise money by soliciting donations, hosting fundraising events, charging admission for park programs, and running

concession stands, as well as by naming new amenities such as a carousel, fountain and ice rink after donors.

Like other nongovernmental agencies that receive city funding, such as the Ferguson Library and the Stamford Museum & Nature Center, the collaborative would be allowed to seek city funding for capital projects. The group could use its own money for park improvements, though projects costing more than \$25,000 would require city approval.

While Old Town Hall would be run by a government-controlled board — members include several elected officials, including the mayor or his designee, two members of the Board of Representatives and a member of the Board of Finance — Mill River Park would be run

by a private organization.

The collaborative has about 20 board members, who are volunteers selected by the current leadership, Executive Director Milton Puryear said. Though it is not a government body, several city employees and elected officials serve on the board, including Parks Superintendent Mickey Docimo, Land Use Bureau Chief Robin Stein and City Rep. Harry Day, R-13.

The Board of Representatives has proposed requiring the collaborative board to include at least one city legislator to give the city more control. The collaborative supports the provision.

"I can't ever imagine that we would not ever have someone from the Board of Reps," Puryear said. "We'd like to have

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someone from every board.”

After the river is dredged by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers — which could start as early as next year — and lighting throughout the park is improved, Puryear said the collaborative would embark on a capital campaign to raise money for other improvements.

“Once that work is done we’ll have a canvas where more specific facilities can be placed,” he said.

Among the improvements planned is decorative lighting for the bridges over the Mill River.

“Each bridge we want illuminated in a unique way so they become attractions in and of themselves,” Puryear said.

City legislators must approve

the management agreement as well as the transfer oversight from the Parks and Recreation Commission to the collaborative, for the deal to proceed. The board also is considering a city ordinance that would give the collaborative the authority to name new park facilities.

The board is expected to vote on both proposals when it meets Nov. 7.