

P&Z green lights zone change for city event center

BY MICHAEL H. O'DONNELL
modonnell@journalnet.com

POLL

Do you support the proposed new location of the event center? Take the poll at idahostatejournal.com.

POCATELLO — After abandoning efforts to build a new event center in Chubbuck, the Pocatello/Chubbuck Auditorium District moved one step closer to forming a partnership with Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church to build the center on church property near the motel/hotel cluster in the Highland area off Baldy Avenue Wednesday night.

If constructed, the new event center would be leased by Grace Lutheran to the Auditorium District.

"We're excited we're taking the steps for it," said Grace Lutheran pastor Jonathan Dinger.

The Pocatello Planning and Zoning Commission unanimously approved a contract rezone from Residential Commercial Professional, or RCP, to Commercial General for the 8.69 acres of church-owned property involved in the creation of the event center at its Wednesday meeting. The recommendation will now go to the Pocatello City Council on Aug. 20 for a full hearing.

See Center, A5

Center

Continued from A1

Associate planner for the city, Dave Foster, said the center would also require some additional conditional-use permits to be approved by the City Council.

"There are already uses permitted in that zone that are essentially the same," Foster said about the planned event center. "This is kind of a conditional use permit on steroids."

The shift to a new location other than the property on Knudsen Corner in Chubbuck became necessary because financing for the Chubbuck location became impossible to secure, according to Executive Director of the Pocatello-Chubbuck Auditorium District Raul Cano.

"We've been working on this for four years," Cano said about trying to use the Chubbuck location. "We just couldn't find anyone to finance it."

Cano said banks were reluctant to lend money to the Auditorium District because it must secure funding from its board for an event center each year. There is no guarantee that funding will be approved annually. Money for an event center comes to the Auditorium District through a 5 percent "bed tax" charged by local motels and hotels to guests.

The payoff is that having an event center would draw more visitors to the Gate City and increase the demand for lodging.

"We're looking at generating the revenue and paying the rent," Cano said about the new event center.

Dinger said Grace Lutheran is able to tap into financing that would be unavailable through a normal lending institution because of its great credit history and ability to underwrite the endeavor.

During Wednesday's PRZ hearing, a number of people spoke in favor of the event center in the Highland area with the only expressed concerns being an increase in traffic and the adequacy of parking near the new center.

Foster said peak traffic flows occur on Olympus Drive and Bench Road in Pocatello at 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. He said Baldy Avenue peaks at 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. when Grace Lutheran School is in session and on Sunday's during services at the church. He said events at the new center would not take place during those peak traffic times.

Following the hearing, Planning and Zoning Chairwoman Kathleen Lewis said the city should do an extensive traffic study of the entire area along Olympus Drive once the new Portneuf Wellness Center is fully functioning.

Area resident Mike Siebert said he was fully in favor of the event center.

"This is actually a small event center," Siebert said. "This is a good project. It's a good location and a good use for the property."

Rich Bull of Pocatello said a new center would draw a lot of people to Pocatello for things like basketball tournaments. He said it will have a positive impact on hotels, restaurants and retail businesses in Pocatello.

Project architect Ted Booth said he has been working on designs for both the Knudsen property in Chubbuck and the proposed facility near Grace Lutheran and he feels comfortable with the design off Baldy Avenue.

"It's evolved and evolved," Booth said.

City resident and longtime Pocatello-Chubbuck Chamber of Commerce volunteer Gene Wiggers said the new center has his support because it will help Pocatello become a valued destination.

"I think this will create something we've been trying to do," Wiggers said.