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Saratoga Springs City Council passes Capital Improvement Program budget

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By LUCIAN McCARTY, lmccarty@saratogian.com

SARATOGA SPRINGS — The City Council unanimously passed the city's 2012-2017 Capital Improvement Program Tuesday including the \$5,565,188 capital budget for 2012.

Comments during the public hearing before the meeting were concentrated, as they have been through most of the ongoing discussion over the CIP, to two major projects out of the 17 included in next year's plan: the Woodlawn Avenue Parking Deck and the proposed Eastern Ridge emergency medical services satellite station.

Most of the speakers outlined the issues they saw with the project called "Emergency Services for the Eastern Plateau" in the CIP. Mayor Scott Johnson said the project is a planned satellite station for ambulance personnel to service the community around Saratoga Lake and eventually the waterfront park currently planned for the site.

Public safety commissioner candidate Christian Mathiesen said the city suggested "putting that off until a more comprehensive study can be conducted on the issue."

Joe Dolan, who said he has 18 years in EMS and firefighting, questioned whether an EMS station alone would serve the needs of the community. He also objected outright to the idea of contracting Saratoga EMS for the service: "Private companies have no city oversight."

Many of the city council members said they would like to eventually see a full-service fire station on the east side of the city to respond to calls near Saratoga Lake and the surrounding area, but all of them cited the economics of the issue.

"I do believe the Eastern Ridge deserves services just like everyone else in the city," said Public Safety Commissioner Richard Wirth. "I think the city has to look long-term, but right now we have to do what is affordable."

The Woodlawn Parking deck drew fewer comments from the audience. The project will erect a two-story parking deck on what is now the city-owned Woodlawn Parking Lot at a cost of approximately \$2.6 million. One man expressed his opinion that at least some of the deck should

be something other than timed parking. “I would not object to paying for a permit to park downtown,” he said. “But if I live downtown or work downtown, I need parking.”

Mayor Johnson said the three public hearings held on the CIP allowed for “ample discussion on the topics,” and said with regard to the EMS station “The city cannot afford to build and staff a fire station. I think this is a good solution, at least in the meantime.”

Johnson said he has spoken to people in communities near where the station would be located. “They are not worried about their houses burning down,” he said. “They are worried about a medical emergency.” He also highlighted a recent fire department report that showed of the nearly 3,500 emergency calls in the city, only 141 were to communities east of the Northway.

With the passage of the CIP, the city is authorized to bond the \$5.6 million in its capital budget, but as Commissioner Ken Ivins pointed out, “We don’t have to bond that money.” He said if something changes with any of the projects, the city could opt not to pursue it.