Good thing C-U forefathers knew to go green

By Tom Kacich

Sunday November 1, 2009

One hundred years ago, the Champaign Chamber of Commerce developed its own subdivision and, smart and forward-looking men they were, made sure that there was land for public use. The chamber of commerce donated eight lots to be used for a future public school.

They knew that close-by schools and parks would be an asset to a community and a neighborhood, not just in the early 1900s but 100 years later.

Need proof? Search the real estate ads for those that highlight proximity to a park. Last Sunday’s real estate ads included these familiar phrases: “close to Hessel Park,” “overlooking Wiseagar Park,” “across the street from the park,” “near Carle Park.”

None said “located north of Interstate 74 where there are only two parks for thousands of people.”

It used to be that public parkland would be donated by a developer as an amenity for residents of a subdivision. Many of Champaign’s best-known parks – Clark, Scott, Hessel, Robeson, Noel, Eisner, the aforementioned Wiseagar – are the result of donations by developers or civic-minded families.

But that kind of generosity is increasingly rare. The Champaign Park District has received only about 100 acres of parkland since 1980. Donations from developers – if there are any donations – now often are 5 acres or less, a size that doesn’t even qualify as a neighborhood park, let alone a big “community park” along the lines of Hessel, West Side, Dodds and Morrissey parks.

And because Champaign has grown so fast in the last three decades and parkland acquisition has not matched that growth, there is an increasing shortage of land for parks. Among Illinois communities, there is an average of 11.3 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents. In Champaign the figure is 8.5 acres per 1,000.

In 69 Illinois communities – as well as thousands of others throughout the country – city ordinances require developers to set aside a certain amount of land for public open space. Some set-asides are based on projected population; others are tied to acreage or the number of housing units.

In Champaign, developers have been able to convince city council members that mandatory land dedication is a bad idea, that it’s an unfair burden upon business and that it will discourage residential development.

“When you talk about 10 acres within an 80-acre development you’re talking about 10 percent of the land,” said developer Shawn Luessie of the Devonshire Group. “Then you start talking about (stormwater) retention and you may be up to 25 percent. That doesn’t even take into account the street right of way. You’re approaching 40 to 50 percent of the land. A very easy way to explain this to everyone in the room is I buy 80 acres and slice off 40 acres. The rest goes to the city or the park district.”

Sounds reasonable until you realize that someone has to pay for new parkland. Since the developers don’t want to do it (even though they create the need for new parkland), that leaves it to all the other taxpayers.

That means that Champaign property owners who helped pay for Wesley Park and Dodds Park in 1969, Zahnd Park in 1994 and Boulder Ridge Park in 2006 might get to do it all over again. (Between 2000 and 2006, according to the park district, it paid $546,750 for just 50 acres of parkland).

How fair is that, city council members, to taxpayers who already paid for parks decades ago and now will be asked to pony up again, even though they’re not the ones moving into new developments on the city’s fringe?

Local developers want the city to adopt a policy of “mandatory collaboration,” which means nothing more than a promise that developers will discuss parkland donation with the park district. There’s not even a minimum requirement for a land donation.

If the city council thinks that’s a good idea, perhaps it could try the same thing with streets and sewers; just negotiate construction standards the developers are comfortable with.