

RIVERWALK FIXES ESTIMATED AT \$4.1M\ - COUNCIL OK'S ST. PAT'S PARADE PERMIT, DELAYS CITY MANAGER JOB OFFER

By LESLEY CONN 912-652-0326 lesley.conn@savannahnow.com March 11, 2011

Publication: Savannah Morning News (GA) Page: 1A Word Count: 975

Savannah council asks consultants, Thomas & Hutton to review data, return with proposal

Two engineering consultants estimate another \$4.1 million in repairs are needed at the Savannah Riverwalk, but Thomas & Hutton engineers counter that repairs last year fixed stability issues.

City of Savannah officials now find themselves mediating the differing assessments while City Council acknowledges both the risk to a leading Savannah company's business reputation and their concerns that no taxpayer money be spent paying for repairs.

Council agreed on a recommendation from Acting City Manager Rochelle Small-Toney that the consultants and Thomas & Hutton officials be given 30 days to review data and return to council with a repair proposal.

"The next step," she said. "is to sit down with Thomas & Hutton and say, 'What part of this, if not all of this, are you willing to pay?' and to ask, 'Are you going to step up to the plate?'" she said. "...We believe we have sufficient information to show what the problems are, what the fixes are and how to proceed from here."

Alderman Tony Thomas offered the sharpest criticism of Thomas & Hutton, while Alderwoman Mary Osborne and Alderman Jeff Felser worried about future liability from a project that appeared not to have proper due diligence.

"We cannot continue to build city projects that require these fixes," Thomas said. "The cost is brutal to taxpayers, and it takes away from other capital improvement projects in the city."

Thomas said he intends to hold Thomas & Hutton to their promise, made before council last May, to pay for additional repairs that are the firm's fault.

Thomas & Hutton's insurance company paid for an estimated \$3.8 million in repairs to a 448-foot section of the riverwalk last year, but Sam McCachern, a senior vice president for the firm, said Thursday the firm is standing behind the work it did. He cited inaccurate soil condition reports provided by a subcontractor as the main problem.

Thomas & Hutton, McCachern said, filed suit in October against ECS Southeast.

"We repaired what was broken," McCachern said. "To date, there's nothing else that's failed."

Thomas & Hutton has continued to monitor the riverwalk, he said, and has detected no other shifting of sheet piles or the riverwalk itself, an issue that prompted the repairs last year.

The consultants' report, however, outlined repairs that are needed to correct unstable sections of sheet piling and overstressed anchors that could cause structural failure.

Will Tanner, a soils engineer with Geosnytech Consultants, said that "sparse" and "limited and unreliable subsurface investigation" were responsible in part for problems in the 2,100-foot-long riverwalk.

"It does not meet factors of safety that you would attempt to hit when you design something of this nature," Tanner said.

He also said repairs could exceed the \$4.1 million estimate.

Tanner and Gary Greene, the second consultant, assured that the walkway is in no immediate risk of collapse.

Osborne questioned who would risk liability from additional work, and upon hearing from Felser that a lawsuit was likely, mumbled "Let the games begin."

Mayor Otis Johnson picked up that line when he wrapped up discussion.

"Let the games begin because the wall has to be fixed," he said. "The wall has to be safe.

"We have two reputations at stake here. We have the city's reputation, and we have Thomas & Hutton's reputation, and I don't think either wants their reputation sullied by this."

The riverwalk, which stretches east from the Savannah Riverfront Marriott along the undeveloped Savannah River Landing site, was viewed as a project to extend the historic downtown and ensure additional public access to the water.

Initial construction cost about \$10 million, \$9 million of that coming from state grants.

SMALL-TONEY CONTRACT

In other action, council met briefly in executive session to discuss terms of a job offer for Small-Toney to become permanent city manager. She has been serving in an acting capacity since May, when former City Manager Michael Brown resigned.

Council agreed by consensus to call a special meeting with City Attorney James Blackburn to develop a proposal. The mayor said council will ask Small-Toney to present her proposal of terms.

As acting city manager, Small-Toney earns \$190,575.

Council also approved extending her role for another 90 days, a condition set by city charter.

GREEN AND ICE CREAM

Council had one of the more light-hearted meetings, courtesy of the St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee's annual appearance to request a parade permit and Stratton Leopold, owner of Leopold's Ice Cream on Broughton Street.

Last year, committee members surprised council by trotting out a green-dyed goat that left droppings in council chambers. It was tamer this year, with only green bowlers and party favors left as gifts. One committee member, when asked by Mayor Pro Tem Edna Jackson what happened to the goat, reported it ended up "on the grill" after it ate his wife's backyard plants.

Leopold was at council to present essay winners of a contest celebrating Black History Month. After a council member joked that Leopold should have brought along ice cream, he surprised them later in the meeting by reappearing, paper hat on head, with trays of the frozen treat in a variety of flavors.

As Johnson dug into raspberry sorbet, he admitted that in nearly eight years as mayor, he had not had this kind of interruption, adding "And I love it!"

Photos by Richard Burkhardt/Savannah Morning News (1) savannah City Council members wear tiaras and green hats as they unanimously approve the permit for the annual St. Patrick's Day Parade during Thursday's City Council meeting. Green bowlers and party favors were presented to the council as gifts. (2) St. Patrick's Day Parade Grand Marshal Walter Crawford was introduced to City Council. (3) Stratton Leopold, owner Leopold's Ice Cream, gives out cups of his famous ice cream to City Council members during Thursday's meeting. (4) Acting City Manager Rochelle Small-Toney talks with assistant to the City Manager Brian Gore.

Savannah Morning News (GA)

Date: March 11, 2011

Page: 1A

Copyright (c) 2011 Savannah Morning News