

City moves forward with seizure of family's land

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LAKE FOREST – City officials on Tuesday voted unanimously to move forward in an eminent domain lawsuit to seize family property that is a component of a land swap deal they have planned with the county.

"There has been no voluntary sale of the land," said City Attorney Scott Smith, after reporting the City Council's actions during a closed session meeting.

The lawsuit is expected to be filed in Superior Court later this week, Smith said.

City officials also approved the transfer of \$840,000 to be deposited with the state to be held in escrow for the Hernandez family until the outcome of the lawsuit is determined.

Lake Forest in June started start eminent domain proceedings on a parcel that is the last link in plans to begin building the city's proposed sports park.

The 6.11-acre parcel – owned by the Hernandez family and adjacent to the Portola Center – is one of three planned for a land swap with the county and could become part of Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park.

In exchange, county officials have agreed to a land swap that will provide the city with more space for its proposed sports park and the county with an added parcel to become part of Limestone-Whiting Wilderness Park.

This agreement arranges for the city to receive 38 acres known as the Glass Creek parcel, northwest of the intersection of Portola Parkway and El Toro Road. The city can develop it as recreational open space and use it to accommodate the proposed sports park and community center.

In 2004, the Hernandez family of Rancho Santa Margarita – who have built mansions and engineered high-rises – bought the parcel zoned business in Portola Hills.

Thus began plans for what Vince Hernandez called "the greatest investment of our lives." The family had plans to build a world-class resort and spa. Nestled atop a bluff overlooking Whiting Ranch, the resort would have had a blue-sky panorama from Santa Catalina Island to Fashion Island in Newport Beach.

The property would be built in Spanish- and California-style architecture, a tribute to the family's Native American and Mexican ancestry. The resort – modeled after the Montage in Laguna Beach and the Ojai Valley Inn in Ventura County – would offer amenities like a stone walking labyrinth, secret gardens, hidden cabanas and an authentic sweat lodge.

Vince Hernandez, who has led the family efforts to get a fair price, said that what the city is offering is not fair market value.

Hernandez says the property is zoned as commercial and he wants \$3.6 million. He says commercial property is selling for \$25 to \$45 a square foot.

"They're offering me \$3 a square foot," he said.