

Lawsuits threatened in wetlands swap

LONG BEACH: City moving ahead with plans to trade Public Service Yard.

By Joe Segura Staff Writer

LONG BEACH — The dust hasn't settled on the City Council's 5-4 vote Tuesday approving the Los Cerritos Wetlands land-swap deal.

Both sides of the disputed deal have been bruised following Tuesday night's late vote, and there are strong signals that more fighting is around the corner.

There are, for instance, two possible lawsuits challenging the land-swap

deal being seriously considered.

The vote capped almost a year of debate over a deal that would exchange 37.7 acres of the Bixby Ranch portion of degraded wetlands in southeast Long Beach for the city's 13.4-acre Public Service Yard by the Los Angeles River. The city is trading its service yard to developer Tom Dean for the wetlands he owns.

On Wednesday, the city continued to move ahead with plans to vacate the Public Service Yard, with plans to link up with a new facility for Oil & Gas Department employees, according to City Manager Pat West.

West said he had no firm deadline for the move from the yard, explain-

ing that a new site still needed to be selected. The city, under the deal, will remain consolidated on the northern four acres of the yard, rent free, for another eight months.

The deal — designed to salvage 37.7 acres of wetlands — was approved by councilmembers Gary DeLong, Dee Andrews, Val Lerch, Suja Lowenthal and Patrick O'Donnell. Councilmembers Rae Gabelicht, Tonia Reyes Uranga, Gerrie Schipske and Robert Garcia opposed it.

One issue for environmentalists centers on the value of the Bixby Ranch land, which has not yet been appraised. They are fearful the wetlands will be priced out of the state's

reach. The state Coastal Conservancy has warned that it will not pay grant funds — once resources become available — beyond the fair appraisal price for the wetlands.

The city's fiscal vulnerability — with layoffs mounting — continues to be a concern.

City Auditor Laura Doud issued a brief warning Tuesday night, especially about the transition of the city yard: "The one thing I do have concerns about is the cost. Now they're a lot more transparent to see that the relocation cost and the cost to rent and especially the cost to construct a new Public Service Yard are significant." On Wednesday, she identified

the design and construction cost at \$5 million.

A couple of legal challenges are being considered. One is being pieced together by environmentalists and another was threatened during the two-hour meeting Tuesday night.

"The proposed exchange would provide eminently developable land to a developer in exchange for lands that are contaminated," attorney Raymond W. Johnson said in a letter read by Tarin Olson.

Prior to any exchange, Johnson asserted, the city needs to perform a California Environmental Quality Act review.

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