

Asbury Park Press

Estimated printed pages: 3

June 12, 2007

Section: NEWS

Councilman now against opening road

CAROL GORGA WILLIAMS

Asbury Park Press

By CAROL GORGA WILLIAMS
COASTAL MONMOUTH BUREAU

A city councilman who last month said he would review the Ocean Avenue diversion plan — one that he said he supported in theory — before deciding his formal position has decided to skip the review before declaring his opposition.

Councilman Brian A. Unger, in a prepared statement, sought to distance himself from what he said were news accounts that indicated a resolution providing for Ocean Avenue to be swapped for The Great Lawn as Green Acres-protected space was approved unanimously. Unger did not attend the meeting that night.

If the parcels were swapped, the city could pursue a plan for opening portions of Ocean Avenue to motor-vehicle traffic in a low-speed, one-way roadway that would be opened in the winter months.

Unger said he initially liked the plan: It called for angled parking on the side streets abutting Ocean Avenue, and wintertime access to Ocean Avenue, which he favored. But City Administrator Howard H. Woolley Jr. said the angled parking only works if there is a loop onto Ocean Avenue. He used Cottage Place as an example. The roadway would be one-way east, loop onto Ocean Avenue, and come out on Matilda Terrace.

"This strip of beachfront is so popular with joggers, walkers, cyclists and families, I just cannot back the city proposal at this point," Unger said, adding that he toured the area and interviewed residents and visitors last weekend.

A preliminary plan is on the agenda for tonight's City Council caucus meeting — public participation is not allowed — but Unger said in advance of that meeting that he has decided to oppose it.

His declaration is merely a statement of his position and has no impact on the proposed plan, which the majority of council members already have authorized the mayor to pursue.

When Ocean Avenue was initially closed in the 1980s, it was widely opposed by city residents.

Gadfly William McLaughlin had assembled a committee, Save Ocean Avenue, and its members presented

their case earlier this week to David R. Smith, team leader for the state Department of Environmental Protection's Bureau of Legal Services and Stewardship. McLaughlin said he presented him with 3,800 signatures from both residents and others who oppose the swap.

Smith met with city officials Thursday. The next step is for the city to hold a public hearing.

Mayor Adam Schneider expressed confusion about Unger's new position, saying Unger, a surfer who long had campaigned about the need to improve beach access, had supported the swap when city Planner Pratap R. Talwar reviewed it for the council seven weeks ago.

The plan includes provisions for more handicapped parking.

"It is also mandated by the DEP that you have access, signage and parking within one-quarter mile of the beach entrances," Schneider said. "We don't have that."

Unger said Talwar's presentation was verbal, and the councilman said he wanted to see formal plans. Unger said the council relies too frequently on verbal reports to block public access to reports that do not exist because they were never put to paper.

"I just think the situation is so complex, it is premature to do this swap," Unger said.

Schneider, meanwhile, countered by saying it was Unger who was being premature in his opposition.

"For someone who has been a beach access advocate for so long, I'm just surprised he would say no without looking at the actual proposal," Schneider said. "I may remind him of that when we have issues with Elberon" in which Unger favors access over private property to the beach when the Ocean Avenue plan involves access over public property to the beach.

"Here what we're really talking about is better streets over public land to improve access," Schneider said. "I think Brian saw the opposition" and changed his position.

"I think this is the essence of good governing: making decisions on the facts, not on the emotion."

Those who want to enjoy a walk along the ocean will one day get a refurbished boardwalk, courtesy of Hovnanian, even though negotiations have dragged on for years and seemed tied to the tenuous market forces being exerted upon the home builder.

Unger notes Hovnanian has not come up with the promised \$12 million for the boardwalk, while Schneider said the boardwalk will get rebuilt at twice its existing width. If Hovnanian doesn't build the boardwalk, it doesn't build Beachfront South, a multi-million dollar development deal in the city, Schneider said.

IF YOU GO

The City Council will hold its caucus meeting at 6 p.m. today at city hall, 344 Broadway. No public participation is permitted during the caucus. The regular meeting will follow at 8 p.m.

Copyright (c) Asbury Park Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.