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PARKING GARAGE PLANNED NEAR COURTHOUSE

The Spokane County courthouse's lack of parking is legendary, but help may be on the way.

Except for jurors, anyone with business in the courthouse and surrounding public buildings is at risk of a parking ticket, a long walk or both.

County employees have a waiting list for leased parking, and lack of parking was an argument against building a second jail on the courthouse grounds.

This week, however, county commissioners were told that Greenstone Corp. is planning a parking garage as part of its Kendall Yards development just south of the county campus.

The 300- to 400-stall garage would serve county needs as well as commercial development at Kendall Yards. It might have three stories with a fourth layer of uncovered parking at the top.

The garage would be on College Avenue, just west of the Spokane Regional Health District building, and probably would require a land swap with the county.

It figures into an ongoing request by the health district to acquire ownership of its building, which was built mostly with grant money.

The health district leases the building from the county at nominal cost, but ownership could help the district obtain grants for maintenance and improvements.

The district is responsible for maintenance under the lease, which allows the county to rent back surplus space on favorable terms.

Joel McCullough, the district's health officer and manager, assured county commissioners the district would continue to cooperate with the county.

However, county facilities director Ron Oscarson and Greenstone Vice President Wayne Frost warned this week that transferring ownership to the health district could complicate coordination on a Capitol Mall-style "view corridor."

The concern is that the parcel Greenstone might need is part of the health district grounds, making a swap potentially more difficult.

County and company officials envision a pedestrian walkway lined with shops and cafes and studded with sculptures, interpretive displays and other public amenities. It would tie Kendall Yards to the county campus.

Funding for the parking garage might come from an existing tax-increment financing district that sets aside project-generated property tax receipts for public infrastructure.

Frost said in an interview that the cost of the garage could vary widely, perhaps from \$1 million to \$3 million, "depending on how we dress up the exterior."

Also, Frost said, the cost would depend heavily on whether the garage is considered a public project under state law, requiring contractors to pay higher wages.

Frost said the garage is still in the "concept" stage, and construction is "two to three years out at least, depending on the market." However, he said, three nearby commercial buildings are in the "programming" stage.

If demand and financing permit, "we could see some construction in the first quarter of 2011," Frost said.