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Thursday, June 26, 2003

Council OKs Kroger lot

Proposal to build \$15 million parking deck passes 8-1

By Gregory Korte
The Cincinnati Enquirer

A quickly drafted proposal to build a \$15 million parking deck for the Kroger Co. won approval from Cincinnati City Council Wednesday.

The details of the plan - including how to pay for it - won't come until August. But by an 8-1 vote, City Council said keeping Kroger's headquarters downtown was too important to wait.

The dissenting vote came from Chris Monzel, who said "the current deal on paper is not the best deal for the city." He left open the possibility that he could be won over by August if the city could cut the cost of the project.

Even those council members supporting the deal did so with reservations.

Several council members pressured Kroger to allow its abandoned College Hill store to be used as a neighborhood grocery.

The Kroger vote was the highlight of City Council's last meeting before the summer recess and the beginning of the campaign season. In other action Wednesday:

Mayor Charlie Luken asked City Council for another 30 days to make appointments to the Electoral Reform Commission, citing problems finding a racial, gender and geographic balance.

The commission will be charged with exploring whether Cincinnati ought to change its system of electing council members - either by districts or by proportional representation - and whether the city should abandon the 78-year-old city manager form of government.

The city's three political parties were to submit three names each, with the mayor appointing four more members.

With Republicans voting no, council voted to borrow \$4.8 million to pay the costs of settling a lawsuit over alleged excessive force and racial profiling by Cincinnati police. The costs include the \$4.5 million judgment and more than \$300,000 in borrowing costs.

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Republican Pat DeWine called the financing plan an election-year tactic to delay the discipline necessary to decide how to pay the judgment.

Self-watering flower boxes in Over-the-Rhine - which some council members seized on as a symbol of wasteful spending - won't get city funding after all.

Reversing itself, City Council rejected the \$50,000 expenditure by a vote of 6-3. Opponents called it an extravagant expense in an era when the city is cutting back on services.

Jim Tarbell, the ordinance's chief sponsor, argued unsuccessfully that the window flower boxes were a quick, affordable way to improve the image of Cincinnati's poorest neighborhood in the aftermath of the 2001 riots.

Fines for littering will increase from \$500 to \$1,000. The ordinance, authored by John Cranley, would also increase the penalties for related offenses - like vandalizing a city trash receptacle.

Minette Cooper introduced an ordinance that would require children under 16 to wear helmets while riding bikes.

Children who violate the law could have their bicycles temporarily seized by police.

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