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## Pendleton Children's Center switches focus to Stillman Park

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*East Oregonian*

PENDLETON — As the Pendleton School District closed the door, the Pendleton Children's Center found a window.

The nonprofit child care center walked away from its proposal to acquire a block of bare land east of the Pendleton Early Learning Center and refocused its efforts on constructing a building that would provide care for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

The Pendleton Parks and Recreation Commission at a meeting Tuesday, Aug. 10, recommended the city approve leasing a section of Stillman Park, 413 S.E. Byers Ave., to the children's center. After the meeting, Kathryn Brown, the center's secretary-treasurer, said the nonprofit aims



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**The Pendleton Parks and Recreation Commission, during a meeting Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2021, recommended the city approve leasing a section of Stillman Park to the Pendleton Children's Center.**

to open its new facility next summer should the Pendleton City Council greenlight the project. Brown also is a member of the commission and

the vice president of the EO Media Group, the parent company of the East Oregonian.

Brown said the center was

attracted to the property because of its playground and its proximity to the InterMountain Education Service District's Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education program. The center plans to place a modular or prefabricated building where the park's tennis courts are now. Parks and recreation director Liam Hughes said the courts had fallen on hard times.

"They're in disrepair," he said. "They're in need of maintenance. Something needs to happen there."

Hughes said he doesn't usually support parceling out parks properties, but the children's center would solve Stillman's tennis court issue and is in line with the department's services, which includes an after-school program and a summer camp.

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## Park:

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Brown said the Stillman facility would serve 60-70 children, a smaller number than what the center planned when it sought to partner with the Pendleton School District.

In June, Brown pitched the Pendleton School Board on leasing the property near the Pendleton Early Learning Center, land that once featured the district's central office and Hawthorne Alternative High School but has been empty since the passage of the 2015 bond. Under the proposal, the children's center would pay a nominal rent and place a new building on the property that would serve 150 children.

The board didn't commit to the center's proposal, but would later talk about it privately at a subsequent meeting. The board didn't provide a public response until Aug. 10, when the board voted to formally reject the proposal.

In a memo to the board, Superintendent Chris Fritsch wrote the property was appraised for \$375,000 in 2018 and its value likely would increase in the future. The district is anticipating up to several million dollars in facility costs over the next five to seven years, a number that could be offset by selling the property.

"Leasing the property to a third party to develop would essentially amount to 'gifting' of publicly owned property," he wrote. "Once developed, the property may be of little use to the District. Additional



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**A section of chain link fence surrounding the Stillman Park tennis courts sits in disrepair Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2021, in Pendleton. The Pendleton Parks and Recreation Commission during an Aug. 10 meeting recommended the city approve leasing a section of the park to the Pendleton Children's Center.**

expenses may be incurred should the property revert back to the District in the event the project was unable to identify sustainable funding for ongoing operations."

The board for the children's center attempted to preempt the school board vote by writing an Aug. 7 letter rescinding its request for the school property. But the school board decided to vote on the issue regardless, broadening the language of the action to indicate the district would not entertain any offers on the property at this time.

The center's potential partnership with the city also would end the

nonprofit's pursuance of building space at Blue Mountain Community College.

The center had discussed launching its services at BMCC as a stop-gap measure while it raised money for a permanent facility, but Brown said the Stillman facility would offer more space than what BMCC had available. Brown added the children's center still would like to eventually relocate to a larger facility, but the Stillman building would offer Pendleton residents a sound proof-of-concept that affordable child care was worthy of further investment.