

Anything two people know is not a secret

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Save the recreation area given to the City by the federal government or sell the land for another home improvement store?

Mayor Maybe's new favorite jingle is "Get Big Money From Menards."

Let me get this out of the way upfront: My wife and I really like Menards. In fact, a little over a month ago, we visited Menards stores in three cities and we shopped - we bought enough to be waiting for a few hundred dollars of Menards credit certificates. It isn't just because they are a central Wisconsin-based chain and we're both from within a hundred miles of Menards home in Eau Claire. They have very nice stores and are priced competitively to the larger Home Depot and Lowe's. If a store is built in Cheyenne, consumers will be very impressed. Menards currently has stores in Scottsbluff, Nebraska and Casper.

On the other hand, if a full-size (240,000 sf) Menards is opened in Cheyenne (and that is the size store that would come when they build here, according to the Menards corporate spokesman), it is very likely, almost certain, that at least two of the existing home improvement/lumber stores will close. This market is just not large enough, and there is no reason to believe the economy will get strong enough, to support Menards, Lowe's, Home Depot, Sutherland's, Bloedorn Lumber, Capital Lumber and Mead Lumber.

Here's what this "arrangement" between the City and Menards reminded me of: When I was a young boy, my maternal grandmother, who was in all ways a very special person, gave me a colored egg for Easter one year. She had what seemed like a few hundred grandchildren so it was a particular "honor" to be singled out by any gift from her. Wanting to hold onto her gift, I put it up on a curio shelf in the corner of my bedroom. Not a good idea - no

matter how much you love your grandma. After a period of time, the egg indicated to us it was there. It didn't take long to be reminded that a rotten egg has a very awful odor.

That's what this deal between the City and Menards has come to smell like. The stench is just as strong.

I wrote about the possibility of a Menards store "coming to Dell Range and Windmill" on the front page of the August 4, 2009 Cheyenne Herald - nearly two years ago. My source(s) was good and Menards corporate office did not deny interest - just that there were no specifics to announce at that time. That has been their spokesman's repeated response to my inquiries. I now believe that there were secret ongoing negotiations between the two parties from that far back.

Menards has a retail store in Casper in the McMurry Industrial Park. Because they are a destination store, I thought that they would probably open their store in Cheyenne in the McMurry Industrial Park down I-25 toward Denver - based on that past.

Now, because the "game" played by the City to make the soon-to-be-announced "sweetheart" arrangement with Menards look legitimate and "by-the-books," City officials made a show of sending out "RFPs" (request for proposals) on a deal that had already been struck. That deal is for the City to sell the 22.7 acres

was for the City to sell the 22.7 acres on the east side of Windmill, near Dell Range, to Menards. Having no reason to believe there was another interested party, the City received the only RFP they anticipated and it was from Menards. OMG! To ask residents to believe that the City could announce they would seek RFPs on that particular parcel of land and receive it almost the next day and that it was not prearranged is a reach local residents will not make.

If the transaction were a simple sale of land and the price was a fair price for the land in question, the fact that the City and Menards had been under the covers together for a couple years might be overlooked. After all, such dealings would not set a precedent. The City did the same thing with the acquisition of the Belvoir Ranch. Only in reverse.

I have reason to believe this was not an arms length buy-sell transaction.

First, let's explore why the City may believe it is in the best interests of residents to sell this open space. I personally don't think that it is - the land was granted to the City for use as open space, recreational uses, and That it should stay. To date, except for the Credit Union on Converse, all uses are public - VA hospital grounds, a high school, Brimmer Field, the Junior League baseball fields, Prairie View golf course and Powers Field. There is no pizza shop, no bike shop, no bedroom furniture

store, no State Farm agency, no HVAC shop. So, why defile the natural open space for a large retail store? Especially a store in a retail concept in which Cheyenne is not lacking. A Best Buy might make some sense. For a 240,000 sq. ft. Menards? No.

For a long time, the City took the position that the FAA (Jack Spiker once referred to them as the FFA on a radio program) would not allow any buildings or other use near the flight path to the airport. Trees? The City even forced another recreation provider, a moto cross track, to vacate.

Recognizing that this city, regardless of the mayor, can never get enough money to satisfy their spendthrift ways, maybe they really believe that without this sale the City will be facing bankruptcy or default in coming years. Trust me, \$7 million will not prevent financial calamity for these guys (and gals) at City Hall.

With such controversy, why this location for a retail store that could be placed in a many other locations and prosper? I have reason to believe that Menards wants to locate a regional distribution center in Cheyenne (the I-25/I-80 crossroads is hard to resist) and when the City begged Menards to buy the land along Dell Range, Menards drove this bargain: "We will buy land for a retail store IF we can buy the City parcel at Dell Range and Windmill AND, if we can get that land at our price, we will also build a regional distribution center in Cheyenne." That's another reason the City is annexing land to the Colorado state line at great cost. They want the 8 mills of property tax from facilities placed down there and that is where the distribution center would be located. In my opinion.

I asked Menards for comment. No go.



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