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Community member to hold meeting about El Centro's plans for Argentine property

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The president of El Centro, Inc.'s board on Friday night told community members in the Argentine neighborhood of Kansas City, Kan., that they had no reason to be concerned about the development of 22 acres owned by the organization.

"We will never sell this (property) to a developer that will put a junk yard or salvage yard on this site," Board President Kaler Bole said during a meeting Friday night at the Argentine Community Center.

The standing-room-only crowd - gathered to oppose such a development - burst into applause upon Bole's announcement.

El Centro had reportedly received an offer from Atlanta-based salvage yard operator Pull-A-Part to purchase the 22-acre site in Argentine. But on Friday, Bole said the organization had entertained no such offer.

Earlier this week, Victor Hernandez, a resident of the neighborhood, issued a press release announcing the community meeting.

Hernandez said residents were strongly opposed to El Centro's efforts - El Centro owns the site through its subsidiary El Centro Development, Inc. - to sell the land to Pull-A-Part.

"We know they have entered into negotiations with these types of companies," Hernandez told the Kansan Tuesday. "But we don't know the status of those negotiations, and that's what we're trying to find out."

El Centro chief executive officer and director Mary Lou Jaramillo told the Kansan on Wednesday the non-profit social service agency had in fact received an offer from Pull-A-Part, but had not taken any action on that offer.

"We're not doing anything with [Pull-A-Part's offer]," she said. "We've been a partner with [the Argentine community] for a long time, and we want to hear what they have to say."

Jaramillo said the agency no longer intends to develop the property, and instead is purely interested in selling the site, located north of Metropolitan Avenue between 22nd and 24th Street.

"We've owned that property for quite a few years and we have looked at developing the property ourselves," Jaramillo said. "But prior to my serving as director, the board made the decision to sell the property."

If El Centro had elected to take Pull-A-Part's offer, the agency may have found itself pitted against not only residents from surrounding neighborhoods, but also Unified Government Mayor/CEO Joe Reardon.

Reardon told those gathered at a Liveable Neighborhoods meeting Thursday morning he believed more dialogue needed to happen regarding the future of the site, but added that a junkyard or scrap-metal site wasn't the best use of the land.

"I don't think heading down that path is good for the neighborhood," Reardon said.

The mayor said if the site was going to be used as a salvage yard that the owners would need to apply for a special use permit from the UG.

"That is a safeguard for our community," he said. "But so far, we've not received an application for that purpose."

Hernandez says the site has also been eyed as a possible home for a new Argentine Branch Library. Reardon said he wouldn't rule out the UG "being interested in pursuing such a partnership."

"It's a Brownfield site, so at some level, the UG will be active on the site," the mayor said. "We just want to enter into a dialogue on what is the most positive thing we can do with that land."

The 22-acre parcel of land was the former home of Structural Steel. Although the company went bankrupt in the 1980s under threats by the Environmental Protection Agency to clean up the site, Bank of America - which owned the land - eventually decontaminated the land from high concentrations of lead. The bank donated the property to El Centro in the

early 1990s, but El Centro has been unable to redevelop the site in the dozen years since.

Although El Centro is based in Wyandotte County, it also serves Johnson County, Kan., on an annual budget of \$2.4 million. The organization's Web site says 45 people work at the agency's five locations, and it is funded through a combination of local, state and federal grants and contracts, local and national foundations, corporate sponsors, the United Way and various fees and charitable donations.