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Citizens offer to be watchdogs over open spaces

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Mumbai: Members of many residents' associations, along with politicians of various parties, met on Wednesday for the first time in Bandra to discuss the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's controversial open spaces policy. The policy, passed on January 13 by the civic body, is under review by the BMC after protests by activists.

Members of the H West Federation (Bandra, Khar and Santa Cruz residents), which organised the meeting proposed a 'watchdog concept'. Vidya Vaidya of the federation said, "We can get involved with the BMC in handing over open spaces in our vicinity. There are almost 29 spaces in our ward. We will ensure the space the BMC has taken over is secured and maintained, as it was before." Vaidya maintained that there was no need for an open spaces policy when the BMC had funds for maintaining the spaces.

Architect P K Das said expenditure on maintaining the spaces should be solely the BMC's responsibility. But he added that this maintenance could be done through citizen participation.

Many citizens raised concern about the 200 open spaces the BMC is taking back from various organizations.

Ashok Rawat, an activist, pointed out that no third party interests should be created through the policy. "Recreational grounds (RG)/playgrounds (PG) are non-buildable and should remain as they are," said Rawat.

RTI activist Shailesh Gandhi said the concept of creating third party interests by bringing in a policy was flawed. "There can never be any argument of not being able to maintain public open spaces in the city by the corporation. Will they tomorrow say that they cannot maintain roads too and therefore let us privatise them too?" said Gandhi.

BJP MLA Ameet Satam clarified that there was a clear-cut stay of the policy. "Any policy for the city should have all stakeholders' suggestions. We need a watchdog policy instead of anybody bidding for our public open plots. I agree with the watchdog policy proposed by the federation," said Satam.

But Shiv Sena corporator Kishori Pednekar said, "The Shiv Sena has been cornered over this policy."

Opposition party corporators criticized chief minister Devendra Fadnavis's move to get the policy reviewed. Congress corporator Mohsin Haider said there was no question of a review. "As the policy was passed by the civic house, it will anyway be sent to the state government for final approval; the CM could have then stayed or scrapped it," said Haider.