

## District 99, Woodridge discuss sale of property Officials disagree about right of first refusal

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District 99 continued to meet with Woodridge officials this week to work out differences of opinion about the proposed sale of the school district's Woodridge property.

As of press time Wednesday, officials from Community High School District 99, the village of Woodridge and the Woodridge Park District had little to say on the matter, having agreed not to talk publicly about the dispute at this time.

At question is whether the school district had promised Woodridge and the park district the right of first refusal in the sale of the district's nearly 45 acres at Woodridge and Center drives in Woodridge. The district announced last week that they would sell the property through a sealed-bid offering, with a deadline of June 3.

The District 99 Board of Education agreed April 11 to sell the land. Accompanying an April 12 press release announcing the sale was a fact sheet that indicated "the district has been advised that Woodridge does not have the right of first refusal. However, Woodridge may still purchase the property for its own use or future sale to prospective developers."

On Friday, the village of Woodridge issued a one-page statement about the sale of the land.

"The village of Woodridge and the Woodridge Park District are poised and ready to offer a fair and reasonable offer for the sale of that land," the statement said. "We've believed since 1978 that District 99 could be trusted at their word and stand behind their commitment to offer right-of-first-refusal. We still believe this today!"

According to the statement, the school district entered into an intergovernmental agreement with both the village and the park district to offer a right of first refusal to purchase the site before the school district's decision to offer the land for sale. In the past six months, the statement read, the three parties agreed to follow a process in which the land would be appraised and then purchased jointly by Woodridge and the park district.

"The action that District 99 has taken in the last few days turns their back on the commitments they've made to the District 99 community and the Woodridge community, commitments each has relied upon and believed in," Woodridge said in its statement.

### Part of Woodridge's plan

In the village of Woodridge's Comprehensive Plan, it indicates the village and park district are prepared to acquire the site if District 99 sells the site for whatever reason. The village and park district would acquire the site as equal partners, with each party responsible for 50 percent of the

cost of site acquisition and the initial planning study. Each party would have the ability to designate 50 percent of the land for specific uses.

The land would serve as a connector between surrounding facilities, including Woodridge's village hall, library, post office and police station and Jefferson Junior High School. It also would connect those facilities with recreational sites, including Veterans Memorial Park, the community center, Lake Harriet, Hawthorne Hill Woods and the trail system. The area is referred to as Woodridge Town Centre. Throughout the years, District 99 has allowed the land to be used for events such as the annual spring carnival and the Woodridge Jubilee festival each summer.

"The Woodridge Town Centre is intended to be comprised of open space, public and civic uses, and to serve as a physical and cultural center for the community," the village's use plan said. "The District 99 site, as part of the village's town center, is a visually prominent site that should serve as the community's centrally located, formal gathering space. Appropriate uses for the site, which would establish a strong physical and functional identity for the village would include public, quasi-public, cultural, recreational and institutional uses."

And that plan is what village officials would like to stick with.

"We've always considered that (District 99) land the crown jewel of that whole town center concept," said Keith Frankland, director of parks and recreation for the Woodridge Park District, on Monday afternoon.

Authorities later agreed Monday not to publicly discuss the matter until they held a meeting early Tuesday. But by the end of the day Tuesday, no new information was available. Another discussion involving all three governing bodies had been scheduled for Wednesday, but the outcome of that meeting was not known by The Sun's press deadline.

## Zoning matters

Questions also remain about the potential uses of the site.

Newcastle Advisors, a Chicago-based commercial real estate advisory and development firm, is handling the disposition of the property through a sealed bid offering. A brochure marketing the parcel on Newcastle's Web site lists the land as an "ideal location and size for higher-density single-family or townhouse development" and that it is "zoned residential; designated for 'intensive development' use."

The land was zoned R-1 for residential use in 1978, a classification it still holds, said Amy Boiselle, public relations coordinator for Woodridge. Under R-1 zoning, a developer could build 37 homes on the site. A high-density development would require a change in the land's zoning, a change the village likely would not approve.

"It will stay R-1," Boiselle said. "It has been R-1 for the last 27 years. There will not be multi-family housing there."

District's best interest?

District 99 serves Downers Grove, Woodridge, along with portions of Lisle, Bolingbrook, Darien, Westmont, Oak Brook and some unincorporated areas at Downers Grove North and South high schools. It purchased the Woodridge property in 1966 with the intent of building a third high school to serve the district's growing population.

In 1973, 1974 and 1997 voted against referendums to approve the construction of a third high school. A demographic study of the area in 2004 showed student enrollment in the district reaching about 5,800 in the 2006-07 school year with the enrollment dropping to about 5,200 by 2019. In a June 2004 community survey, a majority of those responding believed the land should be sold.

During last winter, District 99 hired Newcastle Advisors "to help the board determine a value for the property so that we might consider an offer for sale," said Mark Staehlin, controller for school district.

So far, any information about the value of the property has not been made public.

School district officials stress funds from the sale will not be used to fund salaries or benefits, nor would the money be used to restore the \$3.4 million recently cut from the projected 2005-06 budget. Proceeds from the sale would allow the district to move ahead with some capital improvement items at the two high schools, said Faith Behr, District 99 spokesperson.

"That part of the budget has been severely limited in the last few years," she said.

Although voters approved a referendum for major renovations and additions at the schools in 1998, it did not address all of the capital improvement needs. Those include upgrading 40-year-old science labs at South and 45-year-old home economics and art labs at North.

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