

Marchers send message to Dist. 99

By Don Grigas

Staff writer

While ominous storm clouds gathered above, about 150 residents marched past Community High School District 99's administrative offices in Downers Grove in the early evening of June 8 to protest the district's potential plan to sell off a 45-acre parcel of vacant land near the Woodridge municipal complex.

Carrying signs that read "S.O.S. Save Our Space," "Keep Your Promises" and "District 99: Extortion Is A Crime," the group marched slowly past District 99's offices at Springside Avenue and 63rd Street, just west of Downers Grove South High School.

The group continued east along the south side of 63rd Street to Dunham Road, before returning along the same path and then dispersing.

The pickets, many belonging to a citizen advocacy group called Keep Green Space Green, were protesting the way the District 99 officials have handled the potential sale of the property. The group is adamantly opposed to multifamily housing on the land after District 99 hired Chicago-based Newcastle Advisors LLC to put out a brochure stating the land was suitable for high-density development.

In a June 6 interview, District 99 Superintendent David Eblen assured opponents the land will not be sold to a developer June 10 as stated in the Newcastle brochure. Eblen wasn't sure why the information was printed and declared it a "misprint." The District 99 School Board has not yet declared the parcel to be surplus land, which must occur before it can be sold.

The property at 71st Street and Woodridge Drive was acquired by the district in the 1960s for a third high school, but those plans were later scrapped.

The protesters -- as well as village of Woodridge and Woodridge Park District officials -- want to see the open space preserved. Lelah Roy, a Woodridge resident, said any residential development at the site would be detrimental.

"We love our recreational space," Roy said. "Developing it would have a negative impact because of increased traffic and increased school enrollment."

District 99 Controller Mark Staehlin said the district offices were closed when the marchers were there and he did not see what had taken place.

Downers Grove police Lt. Lee Hahn said police did not receive any complaints about the march but did have extra patrols monitoring the area. Marchers were peaceful and did have the proper permits, Hahn added.

Some marchers expressed concern that police might disperse the group, but organizers told marchers the required permits had been obtained.

"We researched this thoroughly, and obtained a permit and filed an action plan with Downers Grove yesterday (June 7)," said marcher Joan Mimnaugh.

John Young, a Woodridge marcher, said the goal was to "make it perfectly apparent to the district that Woodridge residents expect school district officials to follow up on their promises.

"A lot of people are very concerned over the district's broken promises," Young said.

An informal agreement in 1978 provided Woodridge with a right of first refusal in the event the parcel was sold, but District 99 officials contend that deal is not legally binding. School officials maintain they are seeking appraisals and an independent bid to make sure they get the right deal on any potential sale. Eblen and Staehlin have said the district is willing to work with Woodridge in the future.

District 99 has scheduled a special meeting for 7:30 p.m. Thursday, June 16, to review the appraisals. The meeting will primarily be held in executive session and closed to the public, according to Eblen.

Last month, the Woodridge Village Board agreed to file a condemnation law suit in DuPage County Circuit Court to obtain the property through eminent domain, after village officials said the district was not negotiating in good faith.

Many of the marchers wore green ribbons symbolizing the group's request to maintain the parcel as green space.

"We just want to send the message to School District administrators that we want to keep that area green. It's beautiful, and shouldn't be developed for housing," said Jody Nelson, a Woodridge resident.

Jim Wilson, a Woodridge resident and former Woodridge School District 68 board member, said if the parcel is developed as housing, traffic nightmares would result.

"What many people don't realize is that Woodridge Drive carries about 10,000 cars each day. If this were to be developed as housing, Woodridge Drive would be a mess," Wilson said.

Wilson said many protesters also are concerned about the way the District 99 has handled the situation.

"It's been tough to obtain information about it. The secrecy seems a little edgy to me," he said.

Similar marches scheduled for Friday, June 10, have been canceled, and instead rallies have been scheduled for 4 and 6 p.m. at the property site, where green ribbons will be placed on trees, according to Phil Labak, Woodridge resident and march organizer.

Labak said the group has distributed more than 300 green ribbons to Woodridge residents to place on their trees as a sign of unity.

The group marched peacefully, and many waved to motorists who honked while passing the group on 63rd Street.

Woodridge Mayor William Murphy, who marched with the group, said the action was needed to make a statement to District 99 officials.

"The (District 99 headquarters) represents the district and the administrators. And anytime you have residents, young and old alike, coming together like this it sends a strong message that our concerns need to be taken into consideration," Murphy said.