

Woodridge residents voice concerns to Dist. 99

By Sarah Stone

Staff writer

School Board

cites lawsuit

in keeping mum

In response to rounds of questions and concerns raised about Community High School District 99's potential sale of a 44-acre parcel in Woodridge during the June 20 School Board meeting, Woodridge residents heard one resounding reply: no comment.

Due to a condemnation lawsuit filed by Woodridge over the land, District 99 officials said they were following legal advice in rejecting questions about the sale of the property, according to District 99 Controller Mark Staehlin.

However, Staehlin presented the district's side of the recent events, including protest marches and rallies in Woodridge and Downers Grove.

"Some of the misconception out there we believe needs to be cleaned up," Staehlin said to begin the board's meeting.

According to Staehlin, negotiations with Woodridge began April 15 when both sides met to talk about the vacant parcel the district has owned since the 1960s, which Woodridge village officials and residents wish to control as the only sizable green space left in the village.

Staehlin said Woodridge and the district held a second meeting April 19, when the district offered to honor the spirit of a 1978 agreement between them that gave Woodridge the right of first refusal to buy the property at a fair market value -- even though the district was not legally bound to do so.

"We agreed we would suspend the bid process and just go the appraisal route," Staehlin said. "Within two days, (Woodridge) rejected the idea."

However, at the crux of the argument between the two sides are discrepancies over how the fair market value will be determined. According to Woodridge officials, the village offered to buy the property at a price based on an independent appraisal paid for by the village.

District 99 officials, however, contend all attempts to gather appraisals were quashed when Woodridge took legal action under its powers of eminent domain.

"The village wants us to sell the land to them on their terms, on a price they

set," Staehlin said.

Staehlin said because Woodridge refused to work with the district to determine a fair market value, the board decided to continue its bid process in early May. The Woodridge Village Board promptly voted to file suit, along with the Woodridge Park District.

"Within the course of a month, we went from talking with the village to them taking legal action against the district," Staehlin said. "We feel this was rushed."

Some Woodridge residents seemed surprised to hear Staehlin's version of events.

"That's very different from what the village presented to us," resident Laura Saran said.

During the board's reception of visitors, many residents said they wished the district would have communicated its side earlier.

"I think there would have been fewer hard feelings if (District 99 officials) had come out with that information three weeks ago," resident Guy Klinzing said.

Most speakers at the meeting were concerned the property may become the site for high-density, multifamily development.

According to opponents of the sale, 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 put forth 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.

According to Staehlin, turning the property into multifamily housing was one of many possibilities Newcastle explored. Woodridge Mayor William Murphy picked out that one scenario to mount a campaign against the district, Staehlin said.

Through Newcastle, the district also has explored turning the land into practice fields for high school athletic teams, as well as selling all, part or none of the land to Woodridge, or to developers.

As far as the property's future, Staehlin said no decisions will be made until the village's lawsuit against the district is resolved. In addition, the district will remain silent on the issue -- and on the results of all appraisals and bids submitted to the district -- until that time, he said.

According to School Board President Julia Beckman, the decision to remain silent isn't ideal, but is necessary.

"Because we have been sued, we have been advised not to have an open forum until the suit is resolved," Beckman said. "As much as we'd like to share information with you, we cannot because we have been sued. We cannot answer any questions."

Phil Labak, a Woodridge resident and volunteer for the group Keep Green

Spaces Green, which opposes the sale of the property to developers, was among those who expressed frustration.

"I'm disappointed not to see any action taken by the board," Labak said. "Now the ticker is running on legal bills."

Keith Frankland, the Woodridge Park District's director of parks and recreation, attended the meeting and addressed the board along with residents.

"The attitudes you've witnessed tonight are caused by a lack of communication," Frankland said. "We would welcome with open arms an open dialogue. That's all we've asked for, from the beginning."

Stahlin, however, said he sees things differently.

"The Park District said they're approaching us with open arms, but they're also suing us," he said.

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