

Picnic targets awareness of Woodridge open space

By Don Grigas

Staff writer

About 200 Woodridge-area residents gathered for a picnic July 30 on a 44-acre parcel of land owned by Community High School District 99 to raise funds for and awareness of the property's impending sale.

Keep Green Space Green is an advocacy group opposed to a School District plan to develop the site for residential use. Members of the group raised more than \$350 at the event.

Attendees participated in a craft show, pie-baking contest, watermelon eating contest, sack races, water balloon toss contests and other traditional picnic activities.

"Our goal was to bring out the community for a day of traditional, hometown picnic activities, but also to keep the issue on the forefront in the summer," said Jennifer McGrath, an event organizer.

The organization's Web site promoted the event as a way to bring together "the community of Woodridge ... just as we would like our village officials and the District 99 School Board to come together and settle their differences."

Over the past few months many Woodridge residents have opposed District 99 plans that considered selling the land near the Woodridge Town Centre to a developer for residential use.

The School District, which operates Downers Grove North and Downers Grove South high schools, purchased the land in 1966 for use as a potential site for a third high school. But district residents voted down measures to build a new school in 1973, 1974 and 1997.

The district eventually built additions at both schools to accommodate enrollment growth.

"I am not sure if people realize how big that

tract of land is. It goes a long way back from the street," said McGrath.

The site is heavily wooded, but includes an open area used annually by the village for its Jubilee.

"If that ever were developed into 200 or more residential units, it would have a significant impact on the enrollment at our schools, and likely would decrease our property values because of the impact on the schools," McGrath said.

One of the objectives of the organization is to rally support from Downers Grove residents who live in District 99, which serves residents in Woodridge in Downers Grove.

Funds raised by the organization go toward signs, symbolic ribbons and other public relations efforts.

Volunteers have distributed signs voicing support for their cause throughout District 99, and also have placed green ribbons on trees in a show of unity.

Woodridge filed a condemnation suit May 23 in DuPage County Circuit Court in an effort to bring about a negotiated settlement over the purchase of the land.

The village made an undisclosed offer to the School District for the property, but the district solicited bids from developers over the last few months.

Village officials said the action by the School District was an attempt to inflate the perceived market value of the property.

"We won't be held hostage and forced to pay inflated prices," said Tom Good, attorney for Woodridge.

"The intent of the condemnation suit is to ultimately acquire the property, and we will eventually acquire it," Good said shortly after the lawsuit was filed.