

Dist. 99 meeting full of promise for Murphy

By Sarah Stone

Staff writer

Woodridge Mayor William Murphy said it's his nature to hope for the best. So even though relations between himself, the village and Community Unit School District 99 have gone from bad to worse over the past year, Murphy said he is optimistic about the district's upcoming School Board meeting.

"I think that they've said they are going to give a status report on Woodridge parcel," he said. "I'm optimistic that this meeting could be the start of bringing District 99 and the village together."

Murphy said he and other village officials do not know what the board will discuss at its August meeting. And district officials have so far remained mum on the subject since Woodridge filed an eminent domain lawsuit against the district.

However, Murphy said the district's decision to hold its meeting at Downers Grove South High School, as opposed to its usual limited-seat board room on Springside Avenue, is a sign of accommodation.

"I'm hopeful this indicates a turn, and we try to work things out," he said.

The District 99 School Board will hold its monthly meeting at 7:30 p.m. Monday, Aug. 15, in the Downers Grove South High School auditorium, 1436 Norfolk St., Downers Grove. Although details have yet to be released on the board's agenda, district controller Mark Staehlin said information about the Woodridge property will be presented at the meeting.

According to Superintendent David Eblen, the meeting will include an update of the issue and a timeline for the legal process. He said no decisions on the property will be made at the meeting. Although the board had indicated in the past that a decision would be made by August, Eblen said the eminent domain suit has changed that timeline.

"The litigation has certainly changed the landscape," he said.

The district also will present its tentative budget at the meeting. Eblen said both the budget and the property ordeal prompted the district to hold this month's meeting at South High School.

At issue is a 45-acre parcel of vacant land near the Woodridge municipal complex. The property belongs to District 99, and the district has indicated it might sell it. According to a 1978 agreement between the district and Woodridge, the district promised to give the village the right of first refusal to buy the land.

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.

At the board's June 20 meeting, Staehlin said Woodridge and the district held a second meeting April 19, when the district offered to honor the spirit of the 1978 agreement -- even though the district was not legally bound to do so.

Staehlin said Woodridge rejected the district's offer within two days of the meeting.

However, Woodridge village trustee Bob Brandt said the village informally offered \$8 million to \$10 million for the property in October, and formally offered the district \$8.5 million in April.

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.

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, along with the Woodridge Park District, promptly voted to file suit.

Since negotiations went south, District 99 hired Chicago-based Newcastle Advisors LLC to put out a brochure advertising the land. The brochure also stated the land was suitable for high-density development.

The prospect of residential development prompted a campaign against the district and even brought picketers to the district's administration center.

The Aug. 15 meeting will be the first time the district has discussed the issue publicly since its June meeting.

"I'm looking forward to hearing what District 99 has to say," Brandt said. "I hope after whatever they say at the meeting they'll sit down with Woodridge and start to negotiate the sale of the property."

Brandt said the district has spent almost \$150,000 on legal and other fees on the property issue, and Woodridge has spent more than \$30,000.

"That has got to stop," he said. "Taxpayers should be outraged. That didn't have to be spent."

Following the board meeting, Brandt said village officials are due in court Monday, Aug. 22, to report on the progress of the eminent domain suit.

"Hopefully we'll have good news to report to the judge," Brandt said, "and we can put a stop to the litigation."