

# Indecision about land angers residents

School board says it still might have use for Woodridge property

By Mike Mitchell  
SUN CORRESPONDENT

From a parcel of land set aside for recreation to a third high school, back to a recreational area, to a high-density townhouse project, to possibly being seized by eminent domain by another public body ...

Certainly folks around here have been undecided about what to do with this land in recent months.

Yes, the talk is all about the Woodridge property, a 44-acre parcel at 71st Street and Woodridge Drive, which is owned by Community High School District 99. The village of Woodridge filed papers to obtain the parcel by eminent domain through the DuPage County Circuit Court in May. For years, Woodridge expected to buy the property from the district, until the District 99 board sought fair market value by opening bids from private developers.

And on Aug. 15, the school board unanimously approved a resolution that would "reaffirm" the district's need for "certain property" in Woodridge, which the board did not comment on, but it said the land could have future use for the district.

"The board has been forced to take this position," President Julia Beckman said before the resolution was approved. "We have no other choice."

The resolution suggests that the property could be valuable to the district, despite talk of selling it in the past couple of months. The resolution says the land could be used for outdoor educational opportunities and that a portion of it could be maintained for the Woodridge Park District. It also says the school district's enrollment exceeds capacity and that the district is unsure of its future needs for facilities.

The resolution says the eminent domain ruling will temporarily impair all plans for the property by the district.

"Since the board is being sued by another public body, the board has to take this action," Beckman explained to those at the meeting at Downers Grove South High School.

Beckman said the board couldn't comment much more on the resolution since the district will be tied up in court during the next year. That didn't sit well with some residents.

"I would consider your marketing efforts to be arrogant and ineffective," said resident Bill Vollrath, regarding the plans for the high-density homes. "In my life, I have never witnessed such incompetence."

After Vollrath finished, residents in the auditorium applauded and whistled.

"In my opinion, if you would treat the district and this matter like your own personal checkbook, we wouldn't have this problem," said resident Phil Labak, who said the district practiced irresponsible spending. Labak called the resolution an absurd solution to the eminent domain filing.

When Beckman warned Labak that he had exceeded three minutes, the limit for public comments, several people in attendance shouted that they would be willing to give their three minutes to Labak.

"We can't do that," Beckman said. "And please respect the order."

The district bought the land in 1966 for use as a potential site for a third high school. But residents rejected the propositions for a new school in 1973, 1974 and 1997. In June 2004, a community survey indicated that a majority of taxpayers believed the land should be sold.

Many residents complained that the district was going back on its word by putting the parcel up for sale and now passing a resolution to preserve it.

Meanwhile, fiscal management has been a sensitive issue for some residents since the board cut \$3.4 million from its 2005-06 projected budget.

"This board has a legal responsibility to all of its seven communities, and not just Downers Grove," Beckman said. "This board must have the best interest of everyone."

But not everyone is in agreement about the school board's decision.

"As you contemplate this resolution, many in the community believe you have turned this legal matter into a personal dispute," said resident Gary Tagtmeier, who ran for a spot on the district board in April. "It's time to put all personal issues aside and do what's best for the children — negotiate."