

Woodridge continues push for mediation

By Sarah Stone

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Dist. 99 land

issue remains

far from settled

Over the course of the battle between the village of Woodridge and Community High School District 99, Woodridge residents have successfully kept their campaigns to a few, short words: "Save our space," "Keep your promises" and, their latest, "Mediate, don't litigate."

Addressing this latest battle cry, Woodridge resident Phil Labak, spokesperson for Keep Green Space Green, spoke at Woodridge's Village Board meeting Aug. 18.

"We, like you, I'm sure, are sickened by the thought that our children will feel the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars needed to support their education because the District 99 board appears to be spending on legal fees five times that of Woodridge," Labak said.

Woodridge Mayor William Murphy echoed Labak's comments, and said the village embraces third-party negotiations over the issue of the 45-acre parcel owned by District 99 adjacent to the Woodridge Village Hall.

"We would encourage any process of negotiation that the district feels is satisfactory," Murphy said at the meeting.

However, their calls will remain unanswered for now.

According to District 99 Controller Mark Staehlin, any negotiation process outside of the village's eminent domain lawsuit would require the School Board to first vote that it plans to sell the Woodridge property. The board would also have to empower the district to negotiate, Staehlin said.

"That would be a board decision," Staehlin said. "Our position has been, if the village wants to negotiate out of court, they need to drop the litigation. If they were to drop the litigation, it's in the realm of possibility (negotiations) could happen."

Labak, however, disagrees that dropping the lawsuit would lead to direct talks.

"It is now apparent based on the unanimous approval of their Aug. 15 resolution, that even if Woodridge were to drop the eminent domain suit, certain members of the District 99 administration and School Board would never allow for its subsequent sale to the citizens of Woodridge," Labak said in his speech to the village.

The School Board voted unanimously Aug. 15 to declare the site was needed for educational uses. The board passed a resolution that night titled "Resolution reaffirming Community High School District 99's need for certain property located in the village of Woodridge."

According to the resolution, the property "is necessary, suitable and convenient for school facilities ... and for the lawful uses and purposes of the district." The resolution also stated that if Woodridge takes the property by eminent domain, it will "materially impair or interfere with the uses already existing."

The resolution said taking the property through eminent domain will also be detrimental to the public because the district will not be able to use the property in the future for school facilities. It also said taking the land will deny the district the full value of the property as compensation in an eminent domain lawsuit, the district will not be able to purchase similar land with the proceeds likely to be awarded in the lawsuit and the future taxable value of the property will be lost.