

District 99 land is '500-pound gorilla'

The 45 acres of land in Woodridge owned by Community High School District 99 has become the "500-pound gorilla" of district policies and politics. Opinions may differ about what to do with it, but the sheer size and uniqueness of this parcel of land means that it can't be ignored. There is simply no other piece of land remotely resembling it left in Downers Grove or Woodridge, and there won't be in the future.

The mayor of Woodridge wants to obtain the parcel for Woodridge for public use. Can't blame him for that -- it is in the center of town, near the other public facilities, and a prime site for park space or other public uses. One might argue with the tactics he has been using. Public criticism, backing hostile School Board candidates and now litigation are not going to endear him to the people he is trying to cut a deal with!

The District 99 board has been considering selling the property. If they do, they want to get the maximum return they can for it. That is not simply a choice, it is their absolute duty to the people of the School District. They were elected to manage the resources of the School District to provide the best possible level of education. Giving away land would be contrary to that duty.

In their estimation, it is worth much more than what Woodridge has offered, and they are in the process of determining its fair market value. That is a tricky business and subject to many factors. But here is a quick, back-of-the-envelope estimate: the widely quoted figure is that 37 homes could be built with current zoning, which requires one acre per lot. But the surrounding area, indeed almost all of Woodridge, is zoned for smaller lots. Divided into quarter-acre lots, which would make it look more like the rest of central Woodridge, that would be 148 lots. Lots around here go for at least \$200,000. That's over \$29 million, without a word about townhouses.

That is not to say that this is how the land should be used. It pertains to how much it is worth.

Personally, I admire the parks, recreational facilities and bikeways provided by Woodridge. I think they do a nice job with them and could no doubt put this parcel to good use. A piece of land like this represents an irreplaceable opportunity for open space. I'd like to see it remain as open, public space.

But District 99 can't subsidize that goal; Woodridge must pay the fair market value. When you get past all the demonizing, in the end it comes down to haggling over price.

Now if I really had my druthers, it would be to maintain the status quo. On balance, I think the land should not be sold. It's the 500-pound gorilla again, for there will never be another undeveloped parcel like this one. Think of how District 99 has changed in the last 50 years. Education needs and methods are very different now than before. How can we say that in 2055, there is no chance that a third high school will be needed? Maybe birth rates will increase, or smaller schools will be in vogue, or something else will happen that we can't foresee now.

All I know is there is only this one gorilla.

Ken Lerner

Downers Grove