

Residents planning march on Dist. 99

By Kevin Stahr

Staff writer

Woodridge residents are prepared to take a public stand with three marches to protest the way Community High School District 99 officials have handled the potential sale of a 45-acre parcel of open land in their community.

Residents are expected to meet at 5:15 p.m. Wednesday, June 8, at the Meadowbrook Shopping Center at 63rd Street and Belmont Road and march east to the District 99 Administrative Center, 6301 Springside Ave. Similar marches have been scheduled for 4 and 6 p.m. Friday, June 10.

After the Woodridge Village Board approved filing a condemnation lawsuit last month, village officials held a May 31 community forum to take more action against the district, which included the marches, according to resident Kathleen Wolter.

Residents and village officials believe District 99 has not taken enough steps in discussing a sale with Woodridge and the Woodridge Park District. An informal agreement in 1978 provided Woodridge with a right of first refusal if the land was ever sold, but District 99 officials contend they are not legally bound to do so. District 99 acquired the parcel in the 1960s as a site for a potential third high school.

Woodridge Mayor William Murphy has blasted the district for trying to drive up the price by marketing the land to developers. Murphy and residents want to see the parcel remain green space.

"We are seeing a problem with right and wrong. There is a total lack of response to the District 99 residents," resident Phil Labak said.

A marketing brochure put out by Chicago-based Newcastle Advisors LLC said the land would be ideal for single-family or multifamily housing. Wolter said the marches were timed because the brochure states District 99 received bids on the property June 3 and was prepared to select a purchaser by June 10.

"I haven't met one person who wants those townhomes in the middle of our parks. We want to leave it the way it is. That is the bottom line," Wolter said, adding she would sit down in front of a bulldozer before ground is broken on any potential development.

Residents who attended the May 31 meeting were notified of the marches, fliers were passed door to door detailing the plan, and the protest was also described in a special e-newsletter being circulated from the village of Woodridge. Residents have even started a Web site, keepgreenspacegreen.com.

Woodridge Village Administrator John Perry said the village does not want to see the lot adjacent to the Woodridge Village Hall sold to a developer, but upset residents are taking the initiative after the village facilitated the May 31 meeting.

"The village has pretty much done what it can with filing for condemnation. Where it goes from here depends on Woodridge residents and residents of the entire district," he said.

District 99 Superintendent David Eblen said school officials did receive bids and appraisal information this month and are planning to take their time this summer before making a final decision on selling the land. Eblen said he wasn't sure why the Newcastle brochure states a June 10 deadline when that is not the School Board's intention.

"That was probably a misprint on that brochure. I'm very comfortable saying there is no June 10 deadline," Eblen said.

The protests were likely a result of the brochure, he said. He hoped the June 10 protest would not interfere with the Downers Grove South High School graduation scheduled to begin at 5 p.m.

"Graduation is a time of celebration for students and that is where our focus should be," Eblen said. "The district is moving along with the process we have talked about for the past six months. I realize people should give us a little bit of time and be patient."

The District 99 School Board has called a special meeting for 7:30 p.m. Thursday, June 16, at the Administrative Center to review the appraisals and bids, Eblen said. The meeting will primarily be held in executive session, he said.

Downers Grove Village Manager Riccardo Ginex said the protest will require a permit if the group is 50 people or larger. No permit had been requested as of June 6. Doug Kozlowski, director of marketing and media relations, said protesters are not allowed to block the public right of way or the street.

Labak said the march scheduled at the same time as the graduation was coincidental. While the demonstration should be peaceful, Labak said catching the attention of people at the graduation ceremony may be a "blessing."