

Residents organize over Dist. 99 land

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Hundreds of Woodridge residents gathered in the gym of Jefferson Junior High School in Woodridge May 31 to create a plan of action to prevent School District 99 from selling 45 acres of land near Town Center to a developer who might build multifamily housing.

Woodridge Village attorney Thomas Good explained that although the village has control over the zoning of the site, the district, as its owner, can challenge the zoning in court if they don't feel the land is being used for its "highest possible use."

"Basically, they're betting that we don't want to go to court over this," village administrator John Perry said. "That could cost a lot of money, possibly well into seven figures for each party."

The land, located north and west of the Town Center, hosts the Woodridge Jubilee each summer. The village filed a condemnation lawsuit regarding the property May 23. The village wishes to buy the land from District 99, but village officials say District 99 will not negotiate with the village on the sale.

"Obtaining and preserving open space is a community goal," Mayor William Murphy said at the meeting. "The district's attempt to thwart the designation is contrary to community goals."

Murphy cited an agreement the village made with the district that reportedly gave the village or the Woodridge Park District the first right to buy the property if it wasn't needed for a third high school. He provided a record of District 99 School Board minutes confirming this agreement.

The property remains zoned as R-1, single-family residential. At its April 11 meeting, District 99 announced that it was taking bids on the site for multifamily developments.

Murphy said the School District was attempting "extortion" of the village by threatening to develop the land at a much higher density, and for a much higher price, to get more money for the property.

Phil Labak, who lives in the Highlands subdivision near the District 99 site, encouraged residents to work together to keep the land as open space so that village residents could enjoy it for events such as the Jubilee. Residents of his subdivision have already handed out fliers and tried to spread the word.

"Do something tonight to go outside of your comfort zone," Labak urged. "It's time to get off of our soapboxes and onto the playing field. We need to show the members of the school board what our desires are."

Debbie Kelley of Woodridge expressed concern that there was enough congestion in Woodridge without adding another 202 multifamily residential units, a possible plan for the property by District 99.

"There's no space in their plan for cars," Kelley said. "People are going to need parking, and the streets are already crowded enough. Plus, there's already 30 children per classroom in our schools. I don't mind if the district needs to ask for more money for books or computers, but this is ridiculous."

Perry led a question and answer session in which residents asked about other possible ways to prevent development of the land, such as denying building permits or making the land a forest preserve.

Ray Matlin, president of the Woodridge School District 68 School Board raised concerns that District 99 had made no contact with District 68 regarding what impact a development might have on the elementary and junior high schools.

"As far as we know, there would be no financial benefit to either District 68 or District 99 in terms of enrollment," Perry said. "In fact, this would probably reduce net benefits to both."

Perry explained the village had anticipated the land being sold back to them when a referendum to build a third high school was turned down in 1997.

"We have been working for three years to set aside the funds we would need to purchase the land without a tax increase," Perry said. The village sees the value of the land between \$8 million and \$10 million and has made an offer within that range, he said.

After the question and answer session, residents went to an adjacent gym to split into groups and decide what actions were going to be taken, who would volunteer to carry out those actions, and who would lead the groups of volunteers.

The action items they came up with included writing letters to the School Board and local newspapers, attending School Board meetings, putting out yard signs, filing Freedom of Information Act requests to obtain information from the School District, and possibly picketing or taking out ads in newspapers to express their opinions to District 99 about the site.

Residents expressed strong opinions about their desire to see the property be kept open space.

"I have to drive to Chicago on the Stevenson every day, and the only thing that makes it worth it is to come back here and see all the open space and parks," said Woodridge resident Bruce Gurholt. "If they take all that away, I might as well just move to Chicago."

Murphy said the turnout at the meeting demonstrated residents' desire to see the property remain open space.

"I think we have close to 500 people (here tonight). It says to me Mr. and Mrs. Woodridge are totally supportive of Woodridge and the Park District and District 99 sitting down and having reasonable discussions (about the land)," Murphy said. District 99 officials said they are still trying to determine the value of the property, and that Woodridge may not be getting accurate information.

"We are concerned when people get misinformation about our actions. The village seems rather happy to state what are motives are and what are actions are. We are still in the same process in getting the fair market value for the property," District 99 Controller Mark Staehlin said. "We are taking the high road with this issue and intend to stay the course."

The district is hoping people will evaluate the situation in a logical matter, according to Staehlin. School officials haven't even made a determination to move forward with a land sale, he added.

The School Board is trying to deal with a more than \$3 million deficit. If the parcel, which is adjacent to Woodridge Village Hall, 5 Plaza Drive, is sold, school officials would like to dedicate the funds to capital projects at Downers Grove North and South high schools.

Staehlin said District 99 sought its own appraisal and private bids for the land to get the fair market value. Woodridge officials have been upset the property has been marketed as being suitable for single-family or high density development. District 99 should be receiving its financial information back this month and could discuss the matter behind closed doors at its regularly scheduled School Board meeting Monday, June 20.

Government bodies are entitled to go into closed session when dealing with matters involving land acquisition or sales.

Staehlin said the district has made some contact with Woodridge School District 68 about the process and plans to continue to keep a positive relationship with the village once the financial information is evaluated, he said.

"We are still a long way away from any decision, especially a decision that would impact District 68," Staehlin said.

School officials anticipate making a decision whether to sell the land later this summer.