

Village files suit against Dist. 99

By Kevin Stahr and Don Grigas

Staff writers

Community High School District 99 administrators plan to stay the course in determining a fair market value for their vacant, 45-acre Woodridge parcel, even though the village has initiated an eminent domain action to seize control of the land.

Woodridge Village Board members approved filing the suit May 19, saying it will help the village preserve the land adjacent to the Woodridge Village Hall as open space. The lawsuit was filed May 23 in DuPage County Circuit Court.

The Woodridge Park District backed the decision by the Village Board and plans to absorb some of the legal costs it will trigger, according to Director of Parks and Recreation Keith Frankland. The village announced it will hold a special meeting at 7 p.m. Tuesday, May 31, at Thomas Jefferson Junior High School, 7200 Janes Ave., Woodridge, to gather community input.

Village officials reiterated claims May 19 that District 99 has been unfairly trying to drive up the price of the land by seeking independent bids from developers. Advertisements have touted the property as being "an ideal location and size for higher-density single-family or townhouse development."

Woodridge Mayor William Murphy said the village entered into a 1978 agreement that the village would have the right of first refusal if the parcel was ever sold by District 99. "The appropriate word for what (District 99) is doing is extortion," Murphy said

Woodridge village attorney Tom Good said the intent of the eminent domain suit is to acquire the property at a fair market value from District 99.

He contends District 99 will not negotiate with Woodridge, and said the village would not participate in the district's bidding process. Woodridge has gotten its own appraisal of the property, he said.

"The hope here is a negotiated settlement. Hopefully, that would prevent both parties spending thousands and thousands of taxpayer money in legal fees and consulting fees," Good said. "We will not be held hostage and forced to pay inflated prices."

District 99 Controller Mark Staehlin said school officials are "disappointed and somewhat confused" by the eminent domain suit. After first questioning the first-refusal agreement, the district has met with Woodridge twice, he said. School leaders offered to suspend the bidding process and get an appraisal before sitting down to hammer out a deal -- a concept Woodridge rejected, according to Staehlin.

"Instead of working with us in a cooperative way, they don't seem to want to do that," Staehlin said. School officials still plan to work with the village despite the lawsuit's "negative cloud," he added.

School administrators will continue to determine the true market value of the property, purchased in the 1960s as a potential location for a third high school. While a third high school has been ruled out for now, Staehlin noted the School Board has not declared the land to be surplus property, the formal trigger for a sale.

The independent bids and appraisal will be finalized in June, and the School Board will need some time to digest the information before making a decision later this summer.