

Trial date moved in land dispute; district still opposes decision

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Woodridge, IL -

Five months after a judge denied Community High School District 99's request to dismiss the village of Woodridge's condemnation lawsuit, the School Board continues to speak out against the eminent domain suit.

District 99 posted a statement on its Web site Oct. 26 outlining its position against Woodridge — as well as a timeline and frequently asked questions — concerning a dispute regarding a potential sale of a 45-acre district-owned property in Woodridge.

"The Board has a fiduciary responsibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of the taxpayers residing in all seven communities served by District 99. ... In defending the lawsuit, the board is protecting the investment taxpayers have in the land," the statement said.

School Board President Julia Beckman said the board was prompted to make the statement in response to questions from the public.

"We were getting questions from people in the district who didn't understand the situation," Beckman said. "It's very convoluted, and we had an obligation to taxpayers and all members of the community to get it out there. We have to be fair, as we have said many times."

The original trial date to determine the value of District 99's property was set for Monday, Dec. 10, but last week a judge postponed it to 9 a.m. Monday, March 17. Appraisers from both District 99 and Woodridge will prepare estimates for a purchase price, which will then be decided by a jury.

The land was purchased in the 1960s with intentions to build a third high school, but the district began exploring selling the property two years ago. The district claims it was seeking the fair market value of the property by talking to a developer wanting to build townhomes, but the village contended District 99 violated a deal between the two entities stating the village would have first crack at the land if it was ever sold.

Woodridge had the property appraised at \$9.2 million and then offered the district \$10 million for the land in September 2006. The district declined, believing fair-market value was much higher. The District 99 board said it received a bid for the property "offering up to \$24 million," but Woodridge Mayor Bill Murphy said that number is misleading.

Murphy said the \$24 million bid was based on "what-if contingencies" related to rezoning of the property to accommodate high density housing that "would never have passed in the village."

Murphy said he believes the village will "definitely" be allowed to buy the land following the trial, but District 99 is not ready to concede.

By law, the district can appeal the verdict following the trial in March. Beckman did not comment on whether the district would consider an appeal, but she said the board is monitoring other districts involved in similar land disputes.

"It's uncharted territory," she said.