

The uncertain future of the American Legion property

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.- The American Legion is currently negotiating with Woodfield Acquisitions to sell their property off Legion Road, amidst much surprise and disapproval from Chapel Hill citizens.

The Legion granted the Town Right of First Refusal in 2005, under the condition that the land would not be used for a school, but the Legion did not begin preparations to sell until 2013.

Commander for Legion Post 6 Bill Munsee said that due to the high cost to renovate their current post, it would make more sense to sell the land and build a new facility somewhere else. The Legion wants a more modern facility to attract younger soldiers and sailors.

McAdams Engineering conducted a site assessment in January of 2015 and in February, the Legion began soliciting proposals from development companies. Dwight Bassett, economic development officer for the Town of Chapel Hill, says it was at this time that he contacted Munsee to discuss the Right of First Refusal.

In March, Bassett met with representatives from Symphony Properties and Woodfield who were both in contention to bid on the Legion property. Bassett called these gatherings “typical general economic development meetings with no specific interest.” Similar meetings generally take place between the Economic Development Department and developers considering projects in Chapel Hill.

Because an offer is needed to activate the Right of First Refusal, Bassett did not discuss this matter with the Town Council until June of 2015. He presented the Council with their options: try to match an offer or negotiate with the developer to accommodate some town interest in exchange for not acting on the Right of First Refusal.

There was discussion about potentially using the land, in part or in whole, for a new park. The building of a new park on that land has been part of the Parks, Recreation and Greenways Commission’s master plan for some time.

However, the selling of the Legion Property was not publicized until September of last year when Woodfield made an offer on the property for \$9 million. Woodfield's early proposal showed that they plan to build 400-600 luxury apartments on the land, with amenities.

On Sept. 30, Woodfield signed a contract agreeing to buy the land from the Legion for the price of \$10 million, given that certain prerequisites are achieved. The Town was given 60 days to accept the purchase price of the land or withdraw their Right of First Refusal. While it does not appear that the town made any official withdrawal, the asking price did prove too high.

A Parks, Recreation and Greenways bond was approved as part of the Nov. 3 election, but the amount designated for new parks was too low to compete with Woodfield. Joan Guilkey, a Chapel Hill citizen in her second term as Parks, Greenways and Recreation commissioner says that she thinks it could have been possible to re-evaluate the size of the bond if members of the commission had been given the opportunity to review the situation when it first came to the attention of planning staff.

Presently, the closing of the sale between Woodfield and the Legion is still contingent on several town processes, including the rezoning of the land.

Chapel Hill Mayor Pam Hemminger says that at this time Woodfield has not submitted a formal plan for the property, but they did show a "pre-concept" at a public meeting held at the Legion Post on Jan. 13.

Guilkey, who was at the meeting, says the crowd was large, "filling the room and using all available chairs." She also says the crowd reacted negatively toward the proposal presented by Scott Underwood, the representative from Woodfield Acquisitions who led the discussion.

"He tried to paint the picture of the apartment development as a bright opportunity for Chapel Hill, and the crowd literally scoffed and booed him and asked really pointed questions."

Town Councilperson Nancy Oates says the tax burden of more residential property is one of the key concerns for Chapel Hill citizens. The current tax revenues are 84 percent residential, and Oates says, "I would love to see some sort of commercial development there."

Hemminger says increased traffic on already busy and pedestrian-filled roads, the loss of the last large open tract of land in town as a possible park site, and environmental challenges like stormwater management are other concerns for the town.

But a park is not the only thing residents would like to see on Legion land. Chapel Hill citizen Diane Willis says, “If they were going to have housing on that property at all, a lot of us would like to see affordable housing for people like teachers, janitors or police and hospital workers.”

Guilkey also suggests potentially using some of the land for an indoor, competition pool that is privately managed, -, a children’s museum or a cemetery. Additionally, expanding the tennis courts from the adjacent Ephesus Park and the baseball field from Ephesus Elementary, more sports fields could be added to turn the land into an athletic complex.

The Town Council can decline to approve the rezoning Woodfield needs in order to proceed with their plans. If that happens, the American Legion will be able to solicit new bids from other prospective buyers, including from the Town.

According to Oates, it remains unclear how the Council members will vote when they are actually presented with the rezoning proposal. Several members of the council are new, and they have not had the opportunity to vote on many issues, especially development proposals. There is still plenty of time for the town citizens to make their voices heard and influence the outcome.

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