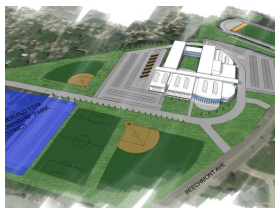


Anderson Township leaders consider ‘what’s next’ for land

Sheila A. Vilvens, svilvens@communitypress.com 5:18 p.m. EST January 7, 2016



(Photo: File photo)

What the Beech Acres Parenting Center property might look like in the future remains unknown, but it definitely will not be the site of a new Anderson High School.

The Forest Hills Board of Education recently voted to move forward with all aspects of the facility renovation plans, thus ending months of speculation about the possibility of a new Anderson High School being built on the site of Beech Acres Parenting Center.

Public discussions regarding the Beech Acres Parenting Center and possible future uses started shortly after the Anderson Park District announced plans to buy 36-acres from the parenting center for future use as a park and for the RecPlex. The bulk of the discussion, however, did not focus on the park district's plans, but the so-called Anderson 2020 Plan, which proposed construction of a new Anderson High School on the Beech Acres property and a multiuse development on the current AHS site.

The plan presented by a developer resulted in a collaborative effort of the Anderson Park District, Anderson Township Trustees and the Forest Hills School District. In the interest of allowing the three entities to fully vet the Anderson 2020 Plan, the park district transferred to the township its Beech Acres purchase option. The township agreed to serve as a holder of the land until the Anderson 2020 Plan was fully vetted.



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FHSD Board of Education

Forest Hills school board President Randy Smith said the board was initially interested in the Beech Acres plan but a number of the early concerns were never fully addressed.

“From the very beginning we identified five or six issues that needed solutions before moving ahead,” he said. “We never got satisfactory solutions for (these) issues.”

Among the concerns were whether the district would have enough revenue to pay the debt on the bonds that would have to have been taken out to build a new high school.

Additionally, Smith said the district learned it wouldn't receive all of the Tax Increment Financing revenue.

He said the revenue source for infrastructure improvements at not only the Beech Acres site but at the Anderson High School location also needed to be clarified.

Lastly, he said getting the appropriate zone changes for the sites was something that would have had to be resolved as well.

“I know everybody in the district was excited about the possibility, but the school district just can't take on a risky proposition,” he said.

Anderson Township Trustees

Township Trustee Josh Gerth, who spearheaded the effort to bring to the community a new high school and recreation center without the use of additional tax dollars, said the idea has now been explored and the school is not going to work there.

What will go there remains open for discussion. Negotiations to purchase the Beech Acres property are still underway.

“There will be a full vetting of input and analysis to make sure we do indeed use Beech Acres for the highest and best use. I don't know what it's going to look like,” he said.

The township needs a recreation complex. There's been discussion whether to maintain the current RecPlex, renovate the existing RecPlex, or if a new facility should be constructed on the Beech Acres site or elsewhere in the community, Gerth said.

"I have said and continue to maintain that we definitely need that as part of our community," he said adding that the existing RecPlex is well-used.



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Anderson Park District

Anderson Parks Executive Director Ken Kushner said that he doesn't know what's going to happen, but everyone is working toward getting the purchase contract signed.

"We have the opportunity to make something really great happen for the community here," Kushner said. "Now it's down to us and the township."

Park Board President Nadine Gelter said it's unfortunate for the FHSD board that a new Anderson can't be built on the Beech Acres site, but there was absolutely no change in the plan from March to now, she said.

"It was a worthy goal, but I am pleased about the renovations at my alma mater and when it is finished, I believe our residents will be pleased as well," Gelter said.

Now she's looking forward to the Beech Acres property being made into park land. When the township agreed to purchase the land it was to serve as a holder until the Anderson 2020 Plan was vetted and a decision regarding the feasibility of a new high school was established, she said.

"With a new AHS on this site no longer feasible, the promise is the land will be preserved as a park," Gelter said. "This purchase will ensure our community will continue to enjoy the only public indoor recreation center."

Citizens group

Resident Joyce Gundling actively led a grassroots group, Anderson Concerned Citizens, advocating for the full vetting of the Anderson 2020 Plan. No real progress was ever made, she said.

The township's three governmental entities met jointly in public Oct. 1 to discuss Beech Acres, and at the time indicated that they would meet again at the end of the month. This never happened. There was one private meeting between representatives of the three entities and developer in October, but no additional meetings were held. There were email exchanges of questions and answers.

The November election which included the vote for the Anderson Township Trustee spot came and went and since then, basically nothing has happened with the exception that the park board removed a levy from the ballot to make way for the vetting process, she said.



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[Anderson Park Board pulls levy](http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/local/anderson-township/2015/10/14/beechnacres/73918404/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=)

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"I honestly feel extremely disappointed in the process, lied to, cheated and disrespected as a resident. We are completely missing this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our kids and our grand kids, and it makes me sad," Gundling said in her email.

Forest Hills facility plan moves forward

During the same organizational meeting where the Forest Hills school board announced it would not proceed with the proposed Beech Acres plan, the board did unanimously vote to move forward with "all aspects" of the 2014 bond renovations.

The district successfully passed a \$103 million bond issue in November 2014 for facility improvements.

The bond issue was for renovations of both high schools, the middle school and five of the six elementary schools and construction of a new Wilson Elementary School. It also includes the addition of facility considerations for all-day kindergarten.

Bids were announced during the Jan. 4 meeting for a number of upcoming projects including a districtwide HVAC controls package, parking lot and electrical service work at Maddux Elementary and renovations to the Anderson High School auditorium.

The board also re-elected Randy Smith as board president and elected Forest Heis as the new vice president.

Reporter Forrest Sellers contributed to this story.

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