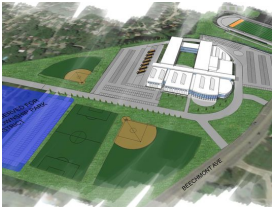


Board shares statement explaining position on Beech Acres

Sheila Vilvens, svilvens@communitypress.com 10:43 a.m. EDT August 13, 2015



Simple economics, and not “selfish reasons,” is the reason the Anderson Township Park District is moving forward with plans to buy property from Beech Acres Parenting Center.

This is what Park Board Member Angie Stocker said as she read a prepared statement on behalf of the park board during its Aug. 11 meeting. The statement was shared before the beginning of hearing of the public.

“I want to take a moment to address the misconceptions that are swirling around,” she began. The park district, Forest Hills School District and Anderson Township Board of Trustees have been in discussions

regarding the property.

“We entered into the discussions under the premise that it would be a win-win-win solution that would not require any additional tax levies,” Stocker read. “Over the course of the last few months, we have not been able to come up with a scenario that fits that.”

In September 2014 the park district entered discussions with Beech Acres Parenting Center to buy nearly 40 acres of land on Beechmont Avenue. The property is adjacent to the existing Beech Acres Park and includes the RecPlex. Discussions expanded to include the township trustees and school board.

Publicly shared concept plans resulting from these discussions show the construction of a new Anderson High School on the Beech Acres Parenting Center property, some land designated for the construction of a new RecPlex on the same property, and a \$100-million-plus multiuse development to be located on Beechmont Avenue and Forest Road where the existing Anderson High School is located. The concept plan calls for TIF funds generated by the new multiuse development, combined with \$25 million the school district has designated for the renovation of the current high school, to fund construction of the new high school.

With many unanswered questions surrounding the concept plan and facing a looming deadline of June 24 with Beech Acres to secure the deal, the park board moved forward with its initial plans. In June the park board voted to place a 0.7-mill 15-year levy on the November ballot. If approved, the issue would raise just more than \$12.8 million providing funds to purchase the land, renovate the RecPlex, and extend the walking trails.

In the park board statement, Stocker outlined eight points explaining why the park district is moving forward with its plan and not the new high school concept.

The No. 1 reason provided was that the concept, as presented, has a \$13 million to \$17 million shortfall.

I want to take a moment to address the misconceptions that are swirling around. You all are aware that we have been in conversations both publicly and in executive sessions with the Township and the school board regarding a joint partnership related to the Beech Acres property. The information that has been disseminated would have you believe that we, the Park District, have walked away to pursue our own interests. That could not be further from the truth.

We entered into the discussions under the premise that it would be a win-win solution that would not require any additional tax levies. Over the course of the last few months, we have not been able to come up with a scenario that fits that.

I want to offer some detail on why we have chosen to move forward with our plan and not pursue the new school concept at this time:

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“We, the park district, would require a levy regardless of what we do, however, even with our levy, there remains a \$3 - \$5 million gap,” Stocker read. “This is a huge concern for us. We do not want to enter into a partnership that is not financially feasible. We have seen what happens when projects do not have adequate funding. The garage contractors ran out of money and declared bankruptcy. There seems to be no recourse and we are left with an unfinished project.”

The referenced garage project was supposed to be a first-run cinema on top of a parking garage located between Anderson Center and the former Kmart building on Five Mile Road. The multimillion project was announced in 2006, then in 2009 the project was scaled back and construction halted. The township invested nearly \$6 million in the project. Now all that stands is an unused, unfinished concrete foundation.

About a half dozen residents attended the park board meeting, but only one spoke.

Joyce Gundling first thanked the park board members for all that they do. She said that she's spent days thinking about the opportunities that are possible at Beech Acres and is excited about them.

She encouraged board members to keep “brainstorming and exploring ideas,” with a focus on increasing property values, preserving strong communities in Anderson Township and ensuring that the school district remains strong.

Park Board Member Rob Herking questions the proposed deal.

“I saw the '06 debacle with the parking garage and promise of a theater and TIF money. TIF money makes me nervous. It has a tendency of not materializing,” he said.

Yet, talks continue. Herking said that as recently as this week he and Tom Turchiano met with developers. Many questions remain unanswered. Can the township legally commit 100 percent of TIF dollars from the development of the current Anderson High School property to finance a new Anderson on the Beech Acres property, Herking asked? What happens to maintenance of new roads associated with the new project if the TIF funds are already committed? There are a lot of “what ifs,” he said.

“I'm willing to still talk about the issue, but we had a deadline. We had to put a bond up and agree to purchase Beech Acres,” Herking said.

Turchiano echoed Herking's comments.

“Rob and I met with the developer and a trustee to further explore this. I want a new Anderson High School as much as you do. I have a freshman,” he said. “But it all has to make sense. It has to make economic sense. If you can't make the numbers work, it doesn't work.”

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