

Anderson Twp. leadership to continue Anderson 2020 talks

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A proposal that could deliver a new Anderson High School and a multi-use development to the community has new life - if high school supporters can prove the viability of their plan.

"We're going to try to listen to what the public sentiment is. We're willing to work with the school district and trustees, but much of this is on their shoulders," Park Board member Angie Stocker said.

During a special meeting Sept. 15, the Anderson Township Park Board affirmed that it will continue to pursue passage of a 0.7-mill, 15-year levy for the parks Nov. 3 to buy nearly 40 acres of property owned by Beech Acres Parenting Center.

The board also committed to providing the time needed for the Forest Hills Board of Education and Anderson Township Board of Trustees to fully explore the so called Anderson 2020 plan. This plan proposes construction of a new Anderson High School and the renovation of the RecPlex on the Beech Acres Parenting Center property, and a multi-use development being built on the grounds of the existing Anderson High School – all without additional tax dollars.

The first meeting of the three entities is scheduled to take place at the upcoming interim trustee workshop meeting on Thursday, Oct. 1 at Anderson Center. The trustees will call the meeting to order at 2 p.m. to address township business. The joint meeting of the three entities will begin at 3 p.m.

The rules of the interim meeting will apply, Board of Trustees President Russ Jackson said. It is a public meeting with no executive session in this case and no public input. The purpose of the meeting is for the three governmental entities to publicly discuss the available options. If the public has questions, they can contact one of the officials directly or address the full board of trustees during its Oct. 16 regular session.

Discussions on the proposal between the schools, township and parks officially ended in late August due to "insurmountable hurdles" according to a press release issued Aug. 25 by the school district on behalf of the three governmental entities. Jackson said at that time, the entities also agreed to revisit the topic should the opportunity present itself.

An unofficial group calling itself Anderson Concerned Citizens has pushed for talks to continue. They created an online Change.org petition calling for continued collaboration among township leadership. The petition shows 370 signatures. The group also has a Facebook page and members have attended meetings.

On behalf of the board, Park Board President Nadine Gelter, in a prepared statement, said the park district has heard the residents and is willing to provide the needed time for the schools and township to explore the concept.

"This is the opportunity everybody wanted in this room," Board Member Tom Turchiano said to the nearly two dozen residents who attended the special meeting. "The schools now have the opportunity to completely vet the plan."

Residents were pleased by the board's action, but questions persist, especially over process.

"I really appreciate the change of tone, I really do," resident and business owner Scott Dorsten said. "I think there is a ton of momentum behind the RecPlex. Whatever it is should be really nice."

Everyone that Dorsten said he talks to thinks that the new Anderson High School project is the No. 1 priority.

"The immediacy of the project is real," he said.

Board of Education President Randy Smith said that the board has consistently been supportive of a plan that would result in a new high school without additional tax payer dollars. He cautioned that there are still a number of hurdles that have to be cleared before the project could move ahead.

"As I said before, the devil is in the details," he said.

Until the Board of Education meets to discuss the release from the park district, Smith said he could not really take a position.

"I can't speak on behalf of the board," he said

The next step is for the board to meet and discuss its options, he said. The board of education's next scheduled meeting is Sept. 28.

The trustees held their regular meeting Sept. 17 and at that time announced the scheduled joint meeting.

Jackson said one thing that will be discussed at the joint meeting is a misunderstanding that a legal opinion is needed for the project to continue.

"That's not fact," he said. "Legal opinion is not the answer."

The law says the township can not directly commit TIF dollars to this project. The township could go through a third party, Jackson said.

A second item that will be presented at the meeting is a proposal for the township, through the use of bonds, to buy the property. Eight months ago the parks approached the township about doing just that, Jackson said. At the time, the township declined.

The township would serve as the place holder with the parks and schools able to buy back the land once everything is vetted. One obstacle in the plan is that six acres of the property are located within the City of Cincinnati. The township can not buy land outside of its jurisdiction. Jackson said a third party, maybe the schools or parks foundation, could purchase that piece.

Trustee Andrew Pappas called the proposal interesting and something that would require some thought. It is something that could buy more time.

At this time it's too early to have the township legal counsel look into something that might not even be possible, he said.

"We will not be seen as an obstacle in this plan. We will move at great haste when it's time to," Pappas said.

"I think it's great that the park district is willing to let the school continue to explore the idea of relocation at Beech Acres," Trustee Josh Gerth said. He attended the Sept. 15 park board meeting. "As we said in our press release a few weeks ago, we will continue to work together for the betterment of our community."

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