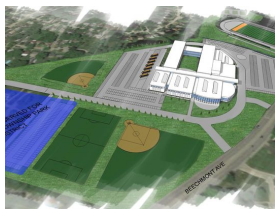


Timing, unknowns kill Anderson High School plan

Sheila Vilvens, svilvens@communitypress.com 3:45 p.m. EDT August 25, 2015



The path to a new Anderson High School is not completely blocked, but officials of the three entities involved see too many obstacles to continue forward.

The Anderson Township Board of Trustees, Anderson Township Park Board and Forest Hills Local School District released a statement Tuesday afternoon that leaves only slight room for optimism among those who support the plan, known as "Anderson 2020."

"Officials from the Forest Hills Board of Education, Anderson Township Park Board and Anderson Township Board of Trustees have studied the proposal over the last eight months. While all agree that many benefits may be derived from this type of development, there are simply too many insurmountable hurdles to overcome due to projects in which Forest Hills and the Park District are currently engaged. For these reasons, all three entities have decided this project is not feasible," the statement said.

Tom Fernandez of SFA Architects, one of the key business partners involved in the proposed plan, expressed his disappointment in the decision.

"Based on similar projects, I am confident that any perceived obstacles can be overcome," he said in an email. "We hope that the opportunity will present itself in the near future to reengage all three public entities. The goal will be to energize the core of the community and build a much needed new high school."

Anderson Township Board of Trustees President Russ Jackson said that representatives from the three parties met last week and agreed to issue a joint statement to let people know that there are many difficulties with the plan that make it infeasible at this time.

"Everyone agreed, if something new came along, that they certainly would consider it," he said. "They didn't want to stop. It's simply that there were too many challenges here."

One of the primary challenges was timing.

"If this idea had come forward a year-and-a-half ago, and there was adequate time to do it, I think there was a chance it could be done," Jackson said. "Everybody wants to point fingers. In this case, the school board, the township, we don't want to point fingers at anyone. There are just a lot of things needed to make something like this work. There just wasn't enough time to clear up all of the obstacles."

The developers, with a vested interest in the proposed project, have presented many facts and figures, he said. The township is not in a position where it can't just assume the information is accurate.

"It doesn't work that way in the real world. We have a fiduciary responsibility," Jackson said.

Resident and Anderson graduate Elizabeth Barber lauded the proposed Anderson 2020 plan as visionary.

"If the 'insurmountable hurdles' are actual roadblocks, this conclusion is understandable. But if the hurdles are nothing more than fears, suspicions, uncertainties or relational issues among leaders of this community, the people of Anderson Township should demand more," she said in an email. "This plan shows real vision for a healthy future for Anderson Township and people connected with that. I think we all learned visionary leadership - the kind that brings renewal and progress to Anderson - is something the people really crave."

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. Soon discussions expanded to include township trustees, the school board and a team of private business partners which included Tom Fernandez of SFA Architects and Rob Smyjunas of Vandercar.

The Anderson 2020 plan, which resulted from the discussions, includes 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 multi-use development 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 multi-use development, combined with \$25 million the school district has designated for the renovation of the current AHS, to fund construction of the new high school.

With many unanswered questions surrounding the concept plan and facing a looming deadline of its own to secure the purchase of the Beech Acres property, 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 over \$12.8 million providing funds to purchase the land, renovate the RecPlex, and extend the walking trails.

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The poster features a central image of a man and a woman in a dramatic, smoke-filled setting. The man is on the right, reaching out towards the woman on the left. The background is a dark, smoky blue-green. The text is in a clean, sans-serif font, with the title in pink and the dates and venue in white. A prominent pink button with white text is located below the date information. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra logo and name are at the bottom.