

http://www.heraldsun.com/news/chapel-hill-revisits-american-legion-land-use/article_4d5cfc0a-ec8a-11e5-9a6a-db46c3cf1193.html

EDITOR'S PICK

FEATURED

Chapel Hill revisits American Legion land use

Katie Jansen Mar 17, 2016



Bernard Thomas

Everett "Bud" Hampton, a U.S. Marine Corps WW II veteran, wears an old uniform after the dedication of a wreath "To our sc
airman and marines" at a Chapel Hill American Legion Post 6 Memorial Day celebration in this Herald-Sun file photo. The I
Bernard Thomas

CHAPEL HILL — The Chapel Hill Town Council took a step back at a work session this week to discuss possible uses for the American Legion property in the town.

Some residents expressed anger about an agreement reached in closed session between the former council and potential developer Woodfield Investments, which passed up the town's right to buy the 36-acre property from the American Legion and opened the door for a proposal to build up to 600 apartments on the property.

Mayor Pam Hemminger said the work session was being held to take a look at the situation differently and to gauge interest from the council in pursuing other options.

House For Rent

No Credit Check. No App
Fee New Homes For Rent
Under \$700



“There’s going to be some major development...that will add more people and businesses to this side of town,” Hemminger said, adding that the town already has 6,500 approved residential units in the pipeline.

Hemminger said she wanted to hear thoughts on what the town could need before deciding to forgo trying to purchase the land.

Dan Jewell, president of a landscape architecture firm who facilitated Wednesday’s discussion, called the conversation “a unique opportunity” to start from scratch and put some ideas on the table.

“This is just the beginning of a very, very long adventure about what might happen on this property,” he said.

Council members threw out suggestions for the property, where many residents have said they would like to see a park.

“I love the idea of preserving some as untouched parkland,” said Councilwoman Jessica Anderson, who wasn’t a part of the original conversation with Woodfield Investments. “I feel extremely opposed to just apartments. That doesn’t make a lot of sense to me. Given what’s in the pipeline and given what’s surrounding, this is ... one of the last opportunities to have an undeveloped piece of land.”

Others also expressed support for preserving at least parts of the land, including council members Ed Harrison and Nancy Oates.

Oates also warned against a possible use of the land.

“As much as I’m an advocate for affordable housing, I would rather not see that area be developed into affordable housing,” she said, pointing out that there are already affordable units nearby and that she doesn’t want to see the area branded as low-income.

But some council members railed against the discussion, saying that the former council had come to this decision because the town didn’t have the money to buy the land.

“Help me to understand how, just because there was an election, all of a sudden we can come up with \$10 million,” said councilwoman Maria Palmer. “We have been working for years to upgrade our facilities that are falling apart ... I’m sitting here — I love all the suggestions. I’m sitting here thinking, ‘Why are we doing this exercise in dreaming?’”

Hemminger said the town could seek opportunities for co-locating or partnering with other entities on the property. She also said the council could look at shifting funds in the Capital Improvement Plan or using some of the \$8 million in bond money that is reserved for parks and greenways.

“But the opportunity is going to go by if we don’t do something,” she said.

Hemminger also pointed out that the agreement with Woodfield Investments wasn’t a done deal.

“There is a contract on the property,” she said. “But it hinges on upzoning this property to be more dense, and we control whether that happens or not.”



Councilwoman Donna Bell said she wouldn't support using bond money for any project on the land because priorities had already been set for those funds.

But Hemminger said the property wasn't on the bond priority list because “this wasn't on the table to consider because we didn't know this property was coming up for sale.”

Bell said she, like Palmer, was struggling with the conversation because it was just discussion before any decision was made. She compared it to November's closed session, saying that too was just discussion.

“Having this dreamy conversation just feels hard because there's nothing tangible to hold onto,” she said.

The public also had a chance to speak and share their visions for the land. Several said they supported a park, and resident Jennifer Newell asked the council to consider a facility for indoor sports.

One The Meadows resident commended the council for holding the conversation.

“We understand this property is going to develop,” he said, noting that residents weren’t anti-development, but wanted smart development. “We’re glad to see that you are taking a pause here and looking forward and seeing what alternatives are.”

Scott Underwood, a developer for Woodfield Investments, was present throughout the meeting but declined to comment, saying he needed more time to digest what he had heard.

Underwood said that Woodfield will reconvene with the Town Council and decide what next steps are before submitting a request for a special use permit.



Contact Katie Jansen: kjansen@heraldsun.com, 919-419-6675. She blogs about Orange County at Orange Pulp: <http://bit.ly/OrangePulp>

Katie Jansen

Katie Jansen covers Orange County for The Herald-Sun. She graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill in 2014, where she studied journalism, English and creative writing.