

Council reviews concept plan for American Legion Post 6 land

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CHAPEL HILL — The Chapel Hill Town Council received a concept plan Monday night for the American Legion property, the first official step in a project that's been under discussion in town since last year.

Scott Underwood of Woodfield Investments said that the team was presenting a new proposal after going through many iterations in response to public comments from a neighborhood meeting and a council work session. He showed renderings of the original plan and the current plan side-by-side.

Underwood said the team has been dedicated to listening to resident feedback.

"We really build to the site and the community," he said. "We don't build cookie-cutter. We try to be unique and engage stakeholders to build something that works for this site and the community."

But many residents weren't happy with the new plan, which called for a maximum of 400 apartments — down from the 600 Woodfield had originally proposed. Many residents stepped to the microphone to address the council during the public comment portion, voicing concerns that have been part of the conversation all along. They said they worried about traffic and stormwater mitigation, that they'd rather see the 35-acre parcel be turned into a park or used for development other than more housing.

Underwood said that he isn't worried about rental units in the project competing with other rentals across town.

"We would not stand before you here tonight to propose something we don't feel could be absorbed in the market," he said.

Underwood also said a preliminary, unofficial traffic study that had been conducted showed that Legion Road was not yet at capacity, drawing laughs from some in the audience.

Woodfield Investments offered the American Legion \$9 million last year for its Post 6 property off Legion Road, contingent upon the council approving their development plan.

The American Legion had a right of first refusal agreement with the town and offered the land to the town for the same price. In closed session, the former town council passed up the right to buy the land, upsetting many residents who say more apartments don't jive with the town's 2020 Comprehensive Plan..

Bill Munsee, commander of the American Legion Post 6, urged the council Monday to facilitate Woodfield's proposal and "look through the smoke screens created by a few activists."

Munsee said the Legion didn't have the money to renovate their outdated building and needed the money to continue outreach to veterans.

"I want to be as frank as I can," he said. "The existing legionnaires are dying...We need to attract younger legionnaires to perpetuate our legacy. We need to move now."

Munsee said that to address resident complaints about the process, he would once again offer the land to the town for a purchase price of \$9 million. The offer will stand for 30 days, he said.

But council member Nancy Oates said she doesn't feel the land is worth that much.

"What you have to offer is not a \$9 (million) or \$10 million piece of property," she said. "I think Woodfield got your expectations up beyond what they should have been."

According to the town's website, an independent appraisal conducted last October found the value of the land to be \$4.8 million under its current zoning conditions and \$10.3 million if it was rezoned to allow a mixed-use development.

Munsee said in a later interview that he offered the land to the council again so no one could complain about the actions of the past council.

"They have the opportunity," he said of the current council. "The ball's in their court."

Some council members echoed residents' concerns about having too many apartments in Chapel Hill.

"I do understand (the land is) not owned by the town, but we do have the responsibility of rezoning it," council member Jessica Anderson said. "I don't see this as a great use. It's not zoned for that use right now, so I think it would have to be something really compelling (to warrant rezoning)."

Oates agreed, adding that residents have been talking about an imbalance between residential and commercial space for years. She said the town currently stands at about 80 percent residential and 20 percent commercial and that she couldn't support a project that proposes 90 percent residential space.

The project also proposes 50,000 to 100,000 square feet of office space and 50,000 square feet of mixed use or civic space. The original concept included commercial space as well, which was nixed from the plan presented Monday night.

Some of the council members expressed disappointment in the disappearance of the commercial space.

Council member Maria Palmer said she thought it was "sad to give up commercial," detailing a vision she had of the surrounding neighbors enjoying an enhanced quality of life thanks to nearby shops they could visit.

Palmer said she supported well-planned developments where people could live and work, adding that she doesn't think the "doomsday scenarios" that some expressed concern about would occur if the project was built.

After hours of discussion, the council moved to submit its comments to Woodfield Investments.

Underwood said Woodfield is taking in the comments and reconvening with consultants to figure out its next move for the project. He said Woodfield's priority is taking care of the American Legion.

The next step would be submitting a formal development application to the town.

"I don't know if we got the clarity we were hoping for," Underwood said about the council meeting.

He said he wasn't surprised with any of the residents' comments and that they were "consistent with what we've been hearing," but he thinks that revising the original 600 apartments to between 300 and 400 apartments is "a pretty fair compromise."

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