

Millville officials, residents debate future of Wawa Tract

By EDWARD VAN EMBDEN Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, December 18, 2009 |

MILLVILLE - Everything regarding a piece of undeveloped land next to Union Lake in Millville is on the table.

That was the message city officials, including Planning Director Kim Ayres, gave residents who live closest to the Wawa Tract on Thursday night at the Union Lake Sailing Club.

The entire tract is about 400 acres. About 85 acres adjacent to an existing shopping center have been zoned for commercial development.

The rest of the land is prized by environmentalists because of its designation as a lakeshore conservation area and because of its potential for open space preservation. The site also is perceived as a prime area for development because of its location near the heavily trafficked Route 55 and 47 interchange.

What will come of the area still has yet to be determined.

"It's the balance of the property, that's the part we're really trying to look out for, reach out for public comment on," Ayres said. "We're trying to be as comprehensive as possible before we put our pencils to the map."

More than a year ago, housing developer Matzel and Mumford withdrew its plan to build 532 single-family homes on the site. Since then, the city has been trying to develop a plan for the land.

About two dozen residents from the city's most affluent neighborhood sat in the club house and discussed the situation with officials. The consensus from the group was that they would not like to see a cluster development of the magnitude previously proposed.

They also object to the prospect of a new school being built near the property and any more, significant, commercial development.

Armed with a folder full of maps of the area, Laura Mitchell questioned why the entire parcel could not be preserved. If state funds are not available to purchase it, she said she hopes the city will make some other kind of arrangement to keep it open space.

"It doesn't need to be developed," she said. "Just maintain it as woodlands."

Linda Forbes asked whether the city was open to keeping it as open space if that is what city residents want. The answer delivered by officials was yes.

The problem, Ayres said, is that Wawa as the landowner has rights of its own that need to be considered. While rezoning can happen, the city cannot, in effect, force the preservation of the land.

New ideas, however, did come up.

Because the land is designated as a lakeshore preservation area, there are special restrictions in place. All new homes, under current laws, must be built on at least three acres of land. The only exception is if a developer plans a cluster site and dedicates 50 percent of the land to open space.

Cluster sites can be removed from consideration if the city desires, Ayres said.

"As a staff, as a city, we're looking at what can be put here, besides (a cluster development)," she said.

Final recommendations for the tract are expected early in 2010. Ayres said the city has also met with five or six environmental groups that have voiced their opinions about what they would like to see done with the land.

The recommendations will be submitted to the Planning Board and, if approved, would go before the City Commission.

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