

Residents, Officials Discuss Use Of Elks Lodge Property

North Wilkesboro residents joined town staff and board members Thursday night to discuss future use of the Elks Lodge building and property on Finley Avenue.

The Town of North Wilkesboro is in the process of purchasing the building and surrounding 4.1 acres from the North Wilkesboro Elks Lodge 1846, but the town board hasn't yet identified how it plans to use the property.

Much of Thursday's discussion was focused on using the site for a new public safety building that would house the North Wilkesboro fire and police departments. This use would mean the existing Elks Lodge building would be demolished and a new facility would be built.

The commissioners are expected to continue discussion on the property Friday (today) during their annual board retreat, which is 9 a.m. to about 4 p.m. at town hall.

Fire Chief Jimmy Martin expressed his support for relocating the fire department to the site, explaining that the location is visible and centrally located, especially considering that future growth in North Wilkesboro will occur along N.C. 18, N.C. 268 and N.C. 115.

"This is a prime piece of property that can send us where we need to go," he said.

Others noted that the fire and police departments have long outgrown their current facilities.

Police Chief Joe Rankin said he's looked across North Wilkesboro for properties that could be used for a new police station.

"There's not that many places where you can build... and if you do find it, it costs millions," he said.

The town is purchasing the Elks Lodge building and land for around \$200,000.

Some at the input session questioned if the property, which is located in a residential area, is best suited for an emergency services facility. They specifically expressed concern with the loud sirens of fire and police vehicles, and said traffic patterns on surrounding roads might make it difficult for emergency vehicles to leave the facility easily.

Using the site, and possibly the exiting building, for residential apartments or condominiums was mentioned, but not discussed in depth. Such a use would require the involvement of a private developer, who would purchase the land from the town.

Commissioners Debbie Ferguson and Joe Johnston said they'd like to see the historic Elks Lodge building preserved and repurposed for a new use.

Town Manager Larry South said the town is close to acquiring the property.

"We're just waiting on the survey," he said. "As far as I know, it's been approved through the upper echelons of the Elks Lodge."