

Other Emergency Services Sites To Be Studied

North Wilkesboro commissioners discussed whether the Elks Lodge property on Finley Avenue is the best site for constructing a new emergency services facility during a town board retreat Friday.

Ultimately, they agreed that they need to consider other locations for the facility before making a decision.

The board and town staff hosted a public input session on the Elks Lodge property Thursday night. While other uses were mentioned, the evening's discussion largely focused on building a new fire and police station on the 4.1-acre property.

North Wilkesboro is in the process of buying the property from the North Wilkesboro Elks Lodge 1846 for \$200,000. The town board approved the purchase in December, with Commissioners Bert Hall and Bart Hayes recusing themselves from the vote because they are Elks Lodge trustees.

Commissioner Debbie Ferguson said Thursday's public input session, which was held to consider various uses for the Elks Lodge property "became, 'we need a new fire and police station,'" she said.

"I think we've gotten tangled up in 'if we don't build the police and fire station there, we're not going to get it,' and that's not it," she said.

Ferguson said she's heard concerns from residents near the Elks Lodge about the town using the site for an emergency services building, due to disruptive sirens and added traffic of emergency vehicles in the residential area.

Fire Chief Jimmy Martin emphasized that relocating the fire station to the Finley Avenue property would make it centrally located, thus improving response time to certain areas. He said this is especially important to consider if the town sees future growth on N.C. 18, 115 and 268.

"You're not going to please everyone," Martin said. "You've got to do what's in the best interest of the town."

Police Chief Joe Rankin said he's looked at available property across North Wilkesboro, and other sites are too small or too expensive.

In response to Ferguson's comment about building the emergency services facility on the Elks Lodge property or not at all, Rankin said, "It's been five years since a needs study said the police station was insufficient."

He said he hopes a decision on building a new police station will be made soon, because the process will take a number of years.

Ferguson said there is a reason why the town couldn't build a new facility immediately.

She said that five years ago, the town was still experiencing the impact "from the worst economic downturn in 100 years. Our income is falling every year, and it doesn't seem to be rebounding. It's going to be hard to spend \$4 million (on the new facility) when we're facing lower income every year."

She added, "It's not like we don't want these things."

Board considers sub-station, seeks unlisted properties

Town Manager Larry South reminded the commissioners that if they maintain the existing fire station on Ninth Street as a sub-station, they can be more flexible about where a new fire station would be built, and how large it needs to be.

Hayes said the board needs to weigh the pros and cons of maintaining a sub-station before moving forward with this approach.

David Smitherman and Amy Stevens of Bear Strategies, facilitators for the retreat, recommended the town board publicly seek properties that may not currently be on the market.

"I like the idea of asking people, 'What have you got out there?'" Ferguson said.

The commissioners said the town needs at least 4-5 acres of relatively flat land for the facility. They said they want to make a decision on where to build by July 31.

They said in the meantime, they need to determine the facility's cost, financing plan, size and design.

South said at this point, he estimates the facility will cost \$3 million-\$4 million.

He said he's requesting a rendering of a public safety facility on the Elks Lodge property to show town residents. He said he also plans to have a rendering drawn of a fire station located on the former Women's Detention Center property on Boston Avenue, which the town also owns.

Commissioner Joe Johnston said he'd like to see an emergency services facility that is realistic about the town's needs, especially if it's located on the Elk's Lodge property.

"I don't think we're going to get a lot of economic development," he said. "We ought to listen to our residents about wanting a neighborhood look on our fire station; we don't need a giant station."

He said he would also like to see what could be built with a \$1.5 million budget.

Other uses for Elks Lodge site not specified

The commissioner said if they choose not to build an emergency services facility on the Elks Lodge property, they'll discuss other uses at that time.

Commissioner Junior Goforth said he doesn't want to see the town demolish the historic Elks Lodge building and later regret it.

Hall said that Elks Trustees have "exhausted nearly every possible avenue for salvaging that, and it's totally out of control....the building has to come down. There's no economically feasible way to save that property."