

Police, Fire Facility Site Still Unclear

With less than a month left before their option to buy property on Second Street for new police and fire department facilities expires, the North Wilkesboro commissioners still haven't decided if it's the right site.

A special called meeting of the board is scheduled for 4 p.m. June 14 for discussion of a public safety facility and where it should be built.

Commissioners discussed the matter Tuesday night when Jim Powell of Charlotte-based A.D.W. Architects presented results of a due diligence study on the 19.5-acre parcel, conducted by town staff and by Mid-Atlantic Engineering and Environmental Solutions.

Powell said the study found no major issues with the property, but noted that N.C. Department of Transportation officials are concerned about a stoplight proposed where a new entrance to the site would intersect with the lower (southern) end of Second Street.

The stoplight would stop traffic in both directions on Second Street with a red light when fire trucks pulled onto Second Street from the entrance drive. Otherwise, it would remain a flashing yellow light for vehicles on Second Street.

DOT officials believe it could be difficult for motorists to become accustomed to this change, said Powell. DOT officials also would want turning lanes on Second Street, but wouldn't require them, he said.

Powell said consideration was given to having a second entrance/exit on J Street, but further review determined that it would be costly to make this usable for fire trucks due to the grade differential.

He said that if there is a second entry/exit, it would need to be the existing access road to the property off Second Street between a gas station and auto parts store. The primary entry/exit would be south of the existing one.

The town's six-month option to buy the property, purchased for \$10,000, expires on July 3. The \$10,000 would go toward the \$500,000 purchase price and is non-refundable if it isn't bought.

The current owners are Janie Winebarger Cheek, Billy Mathis, Maggie M. Mathis, Donna Mathis McDowell, Richard E. McDowell, Robin Mathis Stanley, Rogan Chad Mathis and Renee Mathis.

Powell said the town's estimated cost of the 24,000-square-foot facility and land combined is \$7.2 million. Town staff determined that the property has no issues with zoning or flood plain restrictions. It's zoned general business. An environmental site assessment study by Mid-Atlantic Engineering and Environmental Solutions found no issues.

He said soil test borings going 9.5 to 20 feet below the existing grade found areas of unacceptable fill on the proposed building site, but Powell said the structure could easily be put elsewhere on the site.

He said the site with unacceptable fill was chosen because it provided maximum visibility from Second Street. A water, sewer and gas utilities review found that a 6-inch water line along Second Street would need to be extended to reach the main entrance.

Town staff recommended extending a water line to the new building and beyond to connect with an existing water line on J Street to create a loop, with an estimated cost of \$50,000 to \$60,000.

The review found an existing gravity sewer line along the southern border of the site. Frontier Natural Gas Co. confirmed that it has a natural gas line close enough to be extended to the site.

Powell submitted the property for review by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This review would be required if the town sought a USDA Rural Development Loan to build the facility on the property.

Commissioner Joe Johnston said he didn't yet feel comfortable spending \$7 million to \$8 million on the facility, especially since it wouldn't be fully visible to the public. "It's a tough pill to swallow," he said.

"I'd like to see the chiefs get ballpark figures on which facility they would like and how much it would be. I think we need a lot of information and we haven't gotten any."

Fire Chief Jimmy Martin said, "I am fine with the Second Street property. I don't know that I'm fine with the cost of the facility. I think it could be built for a more affordable price."

Rankin said he initially liked the Elks Lodge site because it could be seen but said he now believes the lack of visibility of a facility on the Second Street site could be advantageous.

Last August, Powell presented plans for a combination police and fire station on the Elks Lodge property on Finley Avenue and a fire station on property on Boston Avenue where a former detention center now stands. The town owns both.

He estimated a cost of \$7 million for the Elks Lodge property option and a cost of \$3 million for the Boston Avenue site option.

He also estimated the cost of renovating the current police station on Main Street at \$3.7 million.

Mayor Robert Johnson said he wanted the police department to maintain a presence on Main Street.

Commissioner Junior Goforth asked Powell if the price for building a combined facility on the Elks Lodge site could be reduced to \$5 million.

Powell said it was possible, but the quality of the building would be lower and it probably would need repairs in 30 years.

Commissioner Bert Hall said he would feel more comfortable with the price being in the \$5 million range. Hall said he still favored the Elks Lodge site.

Commissioner Debbie Ferguson said the Second Street site is the most sensible choice.

"It gives us room to grow. It's easy to work on. I don't see how it could not be the sensible site," she said.

Powell said one of the advantages to the Second Street site is that the facility would have room to be expanded. "I would like to see the facility at a location where it could be enhanced in the future," Martin said.

Hall said he didn't want to get hung up on the location of the facility. "I don't want to delay doing this any longer," he said.

The commissioners asked Town Attorney Gary Vannoy to seek an extension of the option to buy the Second Street site.

Vannoy said he would look into it, but added that getting the required signatures on the initial option took a lot of time. He said he was skeptical about getting all the signatures again by July 3.

In August, Powell said the current police station doesn't meet needs of the department, including its lack of storage areas, fenced-in area for police vehicles, public and private entries and a holding room for detainees.

The fire department also needs more space for storage and training.