

Town Buying Land, But Use Is Uncertain

Although they remain undecided on how to use it, the North Wilkesboro commissioners have agreed to buy a 19.5-acre parcel on Second Street for \$500,000.

They voted unanimously to exercise an option to purchase the vacant property during a special work session Wednesday held to discuss the construction of a public safety facility that would house both the police and fire stations.

Town board members shared differing views on how to use the 19.5 acres and also on how to address facility needs of the police and fire departments.

Views among board members were mixed on using the Second Street property for the joint public safety facility when they unanimously agreed to buy the option to purchase for \$10,000 on Jan. 3.

The option was purchased to allow time for determining suitability of the 19.5 acres for the joint public safety facility. The \$10,000 will go toward the purchase price.

Town Manager Larry South, Fire Chief Jimmy Martin and Police Chief Joe Rankin on June 13 signed a memorandum recommending the Second Street site for the joint public safety facility.

The memo said: "Of any of the options considered for a joint facility, the Second Street site would be our recommendation. It is very accessible, very buildable (site work would be very minimal compared to other locations so more money would go into the facility rather than site preparation) and it would be in a secure and more discreet location. In our opinion, this is a plus, not a negative, given today's threat and potential for harm to public safety personnel. The Second Street site could be easily secured and monitored. This site would also allow more than ample room for expansion or for additional town facilities in the future if needed. It also, even with the purchase price, is by all projections the most economical.

"We would recommend maintaining the Ninth Street fire station as NWFD Station 2 in order to maintain appropriate town coverage and lessen building requirements and expense at the new facility. Also, we would suggest spending the \$175,000 or so as Jim Powell has estimated to maintain a police satellite and presence downtown in the current Main Street location and/or utilize existing space in Town Hall for downtown office. It appears to us the current police station remaining area would potentially make an excellent event and community meeting center if not used commercially at some point."

Town Attorney Gary Vannoy said Wednesday that owners of the 19.5 acres weren't willing to grant an extension of the option beyond the July 1 deadline. The board had asked Vannoy to look into getting an extension.

Vannoy asked commissioners to make a decision on the option to allow enough time to exercise it if that is their preference. If the commissioners want to buy the land, he said, that needs to be stated in writing by July 3. The town then has 15 days to finalize the purchase.

The 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.

South said the decision on using the land for a joint public safety facility didn't have to be made immediately. South said that if the town bought the 19.5 acres and it wasn't used for a joint public safety facility, it could be used for a police station only or a fire station only and also for another government facility.

Mayor Robert Johnson said he didn't think the town needed to buy the property.

"We don't need to buy more property when we have property," he said. "We owned it (the 19.5 acres) at one time and sold it because nothing ever occurred there." Town officials said they weren't sure of the year it was sold, but Johnson said he thought it was in the mid-1980s.

Johnson said he favored building a new fire station on Boston Avenue, where the town owns a former women's detention center, and renovating the current police station to address what is needed.

"It never occurred to me to buy it but not use it for the public safety facility, but we could do it," said Commissioner Bert Hall.

Hall said the commissioners were backed into a corner because they didn't have the information soon enough. "We had this information a week and a half ago. I would have liked to have had more time," he said.

The commissioners received last Tuesday information from several studies performed on the Second Street property, to determine if it would be possible to build the public safety facility on the land. The studies indicated the land would be a suitable location.

Commissioner Joe Johnston said that if the board let the option expire without buying the 19.5 acres, it could probably still purchase the land in a few months. "I don't think there's a big market," he said.

Commissioner Debbie Ferguson agreed with Johnston but said the price would probably be higher then. Ferguson said she favored purchasing the 19.5 acres.

"If we decide to do a municipal service building (joint public safety facility), that's the place to do it," she said. "If people's minds have changed, I think the property is an opportunity if we do not do a municipal service building." Ferguson mentioned the possibility of building an indoor sports complex on the 19.5 acres.

The commissioners discussed building an indoor sports complex during a retreat in January. Town Tourism Director Crystal Keener mentioned at the retreat that the town didn't have indoor basketball, soccer or volleyball facilities. South said during the retreat that other towns have facilities with indoor baseball, tennis courts, basketball and other sports. Keener said it would draw people from all over northwest North Carolina.

Keener and South said during the retreat that they would look into the possibility of an indoor sports facility, but it hasn't come up in the open sessions of any board meetings since then.

Commissioner Junior Goforth said the Second Street property was the best option for the joint public safety facility, but added that he was concerned about the cost.

Martin said he wasn't in favor of the Boston Avenue site for a fire station because of restrictions related to power lines and the topography of the land.

Hall said he wanted to keep the police station on Main Street but voiced concern about security.

Commissioner Bart Hayes said he wanted to keep a police presence on Main Street. "My fear is it would send a signal that the town is abandoning Main Street and I don't want that to happen," he said about building the police station elsewhere.

Hayes also said he didn't support buying the 19.5 acres because it eliminated the possibility of that land becoming an industrial site. He said he wanted the property to keep generating taxes, which it won't do if owned by the town. "I don't think that's the best use of that property," he said.

Ferguson asked Powell how realistic it was to retrofit the police station. Powell previously estimated that it would cost \$6.1 million to renovate the station and add another building in the adjoining parking lot.

"The biggest problem is there is a lack of usable square footage in the way a modern police department operates," he said. "It becomes a very complex urban renovation project. You can always do things for less money, the only question is what will you get for that?"

Hayes suggested transforming town hall into a police station and moving town hall employees into the current police department. Powell said he would have to look into that since it hadn't been discussed before.

"It boils down to doing what's right for the citizens of North Wilkesboro," Hayes said, adding that he would vote against buying the 19.5 acres. "As a town government, we don't need to be in the real estate business," he said. Hall asked Rankin and Martin what they envisioned the joint public safety facility looking like in 2025.

"It will be top of the line," Rankin said. "Very well thought out, well built, well kept. It will be the town's gem." Martin said the fire department would probably keep 4-5 vehicles there and the others at the current station. Martin said if the town wanted a joint facility, the Second Street property was the only site with room to grow. Rankin agreed with Martin.

Rankin said he didn't think having a police station on the Second Street property would impact response time because patrol officers are already assigned throughout town.

Martin said it might slightly affect the fire department's response time because the department's vehicles will have to travel down the steep grade of the property and then stop and look for oncoming traffic before entering Second Street.

Martin said the department would likely sign mutual aid agreements with neighboring fire departments for fire calls. Hall made the motion to exercise the option and purchase the land on Second Street. Goforth seconded the motion. Hayes said he wasn't happy about voting yes, but that he would vote with the board.