

Board Okays New Public Safety Facility

A 19.5-acre parcel located off Second Street near F and J streets and Euclid Avenue will be the new site for a public safety facility to house North Wilkesboro's police and fire departments.

"We need to make a decision and move on," advised Mayor Robert Johnson during a retreat held Thursday in which the board sought to reach a consensus regarding a dual facility and its future location.

"I've had good feedback from citizens for using that site as the property and for the municipal services complex," Commissioner Debbie Ferguson said. "They seem to feel that's a reasonable way to save money. They like the idea of maintaining an office downtown for police during the day and I feel comfortable with that. And it looks like it is the most cost effective way to do what we need to do."

Prior to committing to the Second Street site, Commissioner Bert Hall suggested the board first set a construction budget for the purposed facility. However, Town Manager Larry South offered a more flexible approach.

"I'd hate for us to set a budget and we don't get the facility that we need within that budget or we do things to stay with budget that give us a facility that might not have the longevity and serve the purpose we legitimately need to serve," said South.

In June, the board voted unanimously to buy the \$500,000 Second Street property. In the months leading up to Thursday's retreat, members remained undecided and divided on its use—as well as the construction of a shared municipal service building.

During the July 27 work session, both commissioners Bart Hayes and Joe Johnston said they were not convinced police and fire departments located at the same facility would be the best idea for the town. Yet, after weighing other options, Hayes said he thought it only made sense to use the "large, level tract of vacant property within the town limits."

Fire Chief Jimmy Martin and Police Chief Joe Rankin were also present for the retreat. In a joint memorandum signed by both chiefs and South, the Second Street site for the joint public safety facility was recommended as being the most advantageous.

"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," they said in the memorandum.

"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."

Jim Powell of ADW Architects, a Charlotte based design firm hired by the town to study the issue, estimated the cost of building a 24,000-square-foot combined facility on the property at more than \$6 million.

South said he believed the project could be completed for less.

"I was really impressed with that lot on Second Street," said Johnston, who echoed South's conservative projections. "You've got a million dollars in grading and it's not going to be anywhere near anything like that."

"I'm ready to proceed," he told the board. "I think we need it and I think we've been waiting long enough for it. The firetrucks have been sitting outside in the weather a long time and it's time to get them under-roof. With that said, I'm for keeping the one on Ninth Street. And I'm for keeping something on Main Street in North Wilkesboro as far as police where there will be a police presence on Main Street."

Upon reaching a unanimous decision to utilize the Second Street property, the board has now agreed to move forward with the budgeting phase for the facility.