

Centennial OKs restrictions to complete land deal

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, December 17, 2014 4:30 pm

After considerable debate, the Centennial school board agreed to place a deed restriction on 13.2 acres it owns in order to sell an adjoining 11.1 acres across the street from William Tennent High School in Warminster.

Centennial sold the property to County Builders in February for \$1.4 million. But because the developer needs a zoning change to build 75 townhouses, Warminster requested restrictions on the Centennial property to prevent any more residential or commercial building.

School officials say the district has no intention of selling the property, which houses a baseball and soccer field between Centennial and Newtown roads. But limiting what can be done with the real estate makes it less marketable.

And while the vote was 9-0 in favor of the restrictions, three members expressed reservations before the tally.

“(It) ties the hands on a piece of property that this district may need in the future as a financial asset,” board member Michael Hartline said. “For us to limit our upside potential ... tie our financial hands to a subdivision, I don’t think is right.”

Director David Shafter sought concessions from County Builders, which is seeking to build 20 additional homes with a zoning change.

“The school district is being asked to give up certain rights to its land so that County Builders can build more units,” he said. “And I don’t understand why we are doing that without something in return that’s specific.”

Board member Kati Driban was perhaps the most vocal, saying she was upset the board’s information packet on the issue wasn’t available until a few hours before the meeting. She said she also had legal questions for the board attorney. Centennial doesn’t typically have its solicitor at board meetings.

“I have a duty to every taxpayer to make sure what I am doing here is legal,” she said. “... I am not comfortable putting my yes vote to this without asking a solicitor questions. That is my duty as a school board director.”

As the conversation continued, board President Jane Schrader Lynch and Vice President Mark Miller “massaged” the concerns. “The remarkable part of that was it was clearly not a unanimous decision at the start of that conversation,” Miller said.

Board member Andrew Pollock warned that if the sale agreement fell through, it would cost the district \$1.4 million.

“If that happens, then the taxes that go up as a result ... you can answer to the public about,” he said.

County Builders, which has filed a zoning change request with the township, wants to build 75 townhouses on the property, which faces Newtown Road and flanks Centennial Station and the Majestic Oaks Rehabilitation and Nursing Center, according to Sean Riley, the developer’s vice president. Current zoning allows 55 dwelling units.

After meeting with residents, Riley said he learned of a “tremendous flooding problem here.” So as part of the plan, Riley said his company would build a regional storm water basin to address the issue. He said the water comes from Street Road through Centennial Station and Fox Run Apartments down to Majestic Oaks and along Centennial Road.

“We’re asking for more density to implement that community improvement,” he said, for the “significant costs we’re going to bear.”

The homes would be modeled after Emerald Walk, a development on Street Road and Philmont Avenue in Upper Southampton. County Builders is proposing a tot lot, a gazebo and a 1-mile walking trail in the proposed development. The townhouses would sell in the \$300,000 to \$350,000 range.

As a concession for the deed restriction, County Builders agreed to make six upgrades to Centennial’s fields on the 13.2 acres.

Steven Wiesner, Warminster’s interim manager, said the township asked for the deed restriction “to balance off” the developer’s higher density request. “We wanted the impact of the density increase lessened,” he said.

Chuck Kleinschmidt of the school board sees the increased density as a boost in the tax base for district coffers.

“We’re in a unique position where we can sell a fixed asset like a piece of ground and it turns into a perpetual future income for us,” he said. “I think it becomes a win-win.”

Board member Steve Adams thanked Riley “for giving us a very good price, for dealing with the township, for dealing with this walking path, and for working with the board to come to a good conclusion.”