

Board Questions 2nd Street Facility Site

The North Wilkesboro Board of Commissioners on Tuesday night continued discussions of a possible new site for a public safety facility to house the North Wilkesboro police and fire departments.

Most of the discussion, held during a work session in preparation for the board's Jan. 3 meeting, focused on 19.43 acres adjoining Second Street.

An option to purchase giving the town six months to buy the land, prepared by Town Attorney Gary Vannoy, has been signed by the owners but not by the town board. The option cost is \$10,000, which would go toward the \$500,000 purchase price. The \$10,000 is non-refundable if the purchase isn't made.

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

The town would conduct due diligence on the property during the six month option period, This would include determining if two different access sites to public roads could be established and if the N.C. Department of Transportation would put up a stoplight on Second Street for access.

ADW Architects hired by the town estimated the combined cost of the land and a 24,000-square-foot facility for the police and fire departments on the property at \$6.7 million.

Vannoy said it was difficult to put the option together and took many weeks to get all of the required signatures of owners. "My feeling is if we don't accept this option, we won't get an opportunity to do it again because of the difficulty the first time," he said.

Several commissioners said they weren't sure if the Second Street property was the best option. On Oct. 4, the board voted unanimously to have Vannoy and Town Manager Larry South prepare the option.

Commissioner Bert Hall said Tuesday night that he wanted to be sure the town would put the facility on this land before the option is signed so \$10,000 wouldn't be wasted. "We've got the cart before the horse," he said.

Commissioner Joe Johnston said, "I think both (police and fire) need a public façade and this property hides it. I'm not for it." Johnston's point was that the new building wouldn't have good visibility from Second Street.

Jim Powell from ADW Architects was at the meeting to answer questions from the board.

He said putting a joint facility on the Second Street property was the cheapest option, construction-wise.

The three options Powell presented to the board at the Aug. 26 work session were a joint site on Second Street, a joint site at the location of the former Elks Lodge on Finley Avenue and a fire station in the former women's detention center on Boston Avenue.

Commissioner Debbie Ferguson proposed consideration of the Melody Square Mall property at the Oct 4. meeting, which borders Main Street, Sixth Street and the Central Business District Loop.

South said consideration of the Melody Square property was dropped because it wouldn't meet the needs of a police station due to security concerns and the high cost involved with bringing the building up to code.

ADW also examined property on Ninth Street across the street from the existing fire station, but found the cost to be too high, due to the slope of the property and grading that would be required.

Powell said converting the former women's detention facility on Boston Avenue would be very expensive because it is "built like a tank" and would need to be brought up to code. He estimated the renovation wouldn't last 50 years.

Powell said in the Aug. 26 work session this plan would cost \$3.32 million.

Hall asked about the potential for demolishing the existing building on Boston Avenue and building a new one.

Powell said it was not a part of the study, but would be very expensive, and less square footage, so it would be hard to include three bays, while the Second Street site has room for expansion.

Fire Chief Jimmy Martin said the current station on Ninth Street is already too small. He said doors can't be opened and equipment can't be inspected without taking one truck out of the three bays.

Powell said the Elks Lodge site would also be expensive but possible. He said if it was just a police department it would be doable because that would be half the size of a combined facility. The cost for a combined facility there would be about \$7.8 million.

Johnston said if North Wilkesboro builds the facility on the Second Street site, it would be the only hidden fire department he had ever seen.

Commissioner Debbie Ferguson asked "Does that really matter? It doesn't take away the effectiveness of the fire department."

Johnston replied, "It does to me. People want to see their money."

At the Oct. 4 meeting, Martin said that as a taxpayer, he would like the fire department to be seen.

Powell said the public might be able to get only a glimpse of the facility from the road.

South said he had "security concerns regarding a public facility" and "sitting safety facilities where people can see them is not necessarily the best thing."

"We're in a different world," South said. "It's not just police being shot at, it's emergency personnel, so sitting them where people have access to them, we need to rethink that."

South said the town could put up attractive signage to indicate where the facility is.

Powell said from his point of view, putting the facility on the Second Street site is a no-brainer.

"It would last forever," he said. "You can go whichever way you want."

Hall said he still wanted to know how the town was planning to pay for the site.

"If we can't afford it, we can't afford it," he said.

Johnston also said he is not comfortable not knowing how much money is available to spend before choosing what to build. He said he would rather set a budget and then decide what amenities can be afforded.

"I'm all for the future, but it needs to be a realistic future," he said.

Powell said he understood the commissioners' point of view, but he said this is typically the process for getting a station built.

Johnston said he thought it would be helpful to see plans and costs for other fire stations such as the Mulberry-Fairplains station.

Commissioner Bart Hayes said, "We need to figure out how much we are going to spend."

Hall said "What we want is a nice, efficient building that looks good and will last for 50 years.

He asked if Powell knew of any grants the town could get to pay for the construction. Powell suggested the U.S. Department of Agriculture rural grant program, but South said that would be capped at \$100,000, so it wouldn't pay for much.

Town officials have said that regardless of which plan the board approves, satellite police and fire stations will be able to remain downtown and on Ninth Street respectively.

Police Chief Joe Rankin said it was possible that a satellite police office could move into Town Hall, since it has empty space.

Discussion of the option to buy the Second Street property was added to the agenda for the Jan. 3 meeting.