

Indecisive

Larger and more modern police and fire department facilities in North Wilkesboro are well overdue, but the town board remains divided on how to address this need after discussing it for over a decade.

The commissioners voted unanimously to exercise an option to buy 19.5 acres along Second Street as the site of new police and fire stations on Thursday, even though it wasn't clear if a majority of them actually supported building the new facilities there.

This is particularly concerning because the town already spent money on two other sites considered for new police and fire department facilities. The citizens of North Wilkesboro expect and deserve better planning and more judicious use of public funds.

The town paid the Elks Grand Lodge \$200,000 for four acres that include the old Elks Lodge building on Finley Avenue and Second Street in late 2015. Commissioners Bert Hall and Bart Hayes didn't vote on this because they're Elks Lodge members. Potential use of this property for police and fire stations was mentioned again at the board's June 7 meeting.

In 2011, owners of the Block 46 (former American Drew factory) property deeded five acres to the town for new fire and police stations in return for the town removing the old factory buildings. The town spent over \$1 million on streets and utilities on the 29.33 acres. In 2014, the town sold the five acres for \$425,000 for the Rose Glen Manor assisted living facility.

As for the 19.5 acres on Second Street, one commissioner suggested putting an indoor sports complex there if it isn't used for police and fire stations. Building a facility for indoor basketball, soccer, tennis and other sports somewhere in town was discussed in a town board retreat. North Wilkesboro has much more pressing needs than an indoor sports complex.

Also on Thursday, two commissioners expressed concern about the cost of the joint public safety facility proposed on the 19.5 acres. A Charlotte architect working on the project for the town estimated the cost of buying the 19.5 acres and building a 24,000-square-foot joint public safety facility there at \$7.2 million.

The \$500,000 purchase price for the 19.5 acres appears reasonable compared to its property tax value of \$723,630. On the other hand, the town owned the land once before and sold it for only \$73,500 to Roger Smithey and Worth Winebarger in 1987. 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.

It consists mostly of a flat, graded field. Soil test borings 9.5 to 20 feet deep found areas of unacceptable fill, but the architect said the fire and police facility could easily be put elsewhere on the graded portion of the property.

It's significant that Town Manager Larry South, Fire Chief Jimmy Martin and Police Chief Joe Rankin on June 13 signed a statement recommending buying the 19.5 acres and building the joint public safety facility there because of its accessibility, minimal site work needed, room for expansion and economical cost compared to certain other current options.

They also recommended maintaining the current fire station on Ninth Street, in use for almost 60 years, as a satellite facility, and the current police station on Main Street to keep a police presence in downtown.

Perhaps keeping the Ninth Street fire station open as a satellite wouldn't be necessary if Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro worked with each other better on mutual aid. For the sake of efficiency, this should be explored better. Considering the mobility of North Wilkesboro police officers, is the cost of maintaining a satellite police station on Main Street really necessary?

The need for new facilities for the North Wilkesboro fire and police departments is clear. The commissioners need to settle on an option to meet this need and get it done.