

No Unity On New Police, Fire Facilities

The North Wilkesboro commissioners are considering holding a retreat for more discussion of police and fire department facility needs, including use of 19.43 acres bought in July as the potential site for a public safety building. "I think we're all over the place as far as opinions are concerned about what to do," said Commissioner Bert Hall when the topic was briefly discussed at the board's July 27 work session.

"We need to come together, even though I know we all have differing opinions. The decision is going to have to be made and I don't think we are going to make it tonight. I would suggest we have a meeting soon where we sit around a table and come to some kind of understanding."

Hall recommended that the fire and police departments have representatives at the meeting.

The town purchased the 19.43 acres, located off Second Street near F and J streets and Euclid Avenue, for \$500,000.

Hall said the commissioners could flesh out ideas about the best use of the property and decide on a budget at the retreat.

Jim Powell of ADW Architects, the Charlotte based firm hired by the town to study the matter, estimated the cost of building a 24,000-square-foot facility on the property at more than \$6 million. The plans are designed for both the police and fire departments.

"At some point, I want to see from the two chiefs what they need," said Hall. "What we've taken is what the architect said we need. I'd like more detailed information from the two departments on why they need what they need."

In an interview, Commissioner Bart Hayes agreed with Hall on the need for a retreat.

"We've got a good board and a retreat would allow us to reach a consensus on this issue," said Hayes. "This is an incredibly important decision we are facing because it means we're committing to spending a large amount of money on a facility that once it's built, will be around for a very long time. We're getting closer to this becoming a reality so we've got to get it right."

Hayes voiced mixed feelings on putting a municipal service building on what he thinks is the only vacant property within the town limits that is suitable for industry or residential use.

"That particular property is accessible, flat and buildable," Hayes said. "There are any number of industries that that site would be suitable for. Heck, it would be ideal for a residential community and put houses on it and it's a prime retail location as well. The town owns several other properties we might want to consider."

Hayes and Commissioner Joe Johnston both said they're not entirely sold on the idea of having the police and fire departments located at the same facility.

"I personally don't think we need a dual facility at this time and it's no secret that I'm concerned about the price," Johnston said. "I think we've got pricing for building the Taj Mahal and we don't need something that extravagant. We need to build something with an eye to the future. Build what we need right now and then look at adding 10, 20 or even 30 years down the road."

Johnston said no date for a retreat has been set.

North Wilkesboro Fire Chief Jimmy Martin earlier said the current fire station's training room is too small, so North Wilkesboro firefighters must leave the county for certain training. He said that means they can't all train together because that would leave the town unprotected.

Powell's company analyzed the current police station on Main Street and said it didn't meet the department's needs. He said the police department needs about 13,100 square feet of floor space, but the current station has 8,320 square feet.

The ADW analysis noted the lack of secured fenced-in area for police vehicles and insufficient evidence storage space, including no space for large items kept as evidence. The analysis noted the lack of separate private and public entries, that the current police station only has one interview room (which isn't soundproof), no holding room for detainees and no processing room.

Powell earlier recommended the site on Second Street for a joint facility.