

District to begin negotiating purchase of 44 acres in Town of Port Washington that could be used for school

The Port Washington-Saukville School Board on Monday jumped at the opportunity to negotiate the purchase of the Simplicity proving grounds, one of the few sites in the district that administrators say is suited for a school.

The board voted unanimously to have Supt. Michael Weber and Director of Business Services Jim Froemming negotiate with Briggs & Stratton Corp. for the purchase of the 44-acre parcel off Highway LL in the Town of Port Washington.

Weber said he hopes to present a proposed purchase agreement to the board in February.

The school district and Briggs & Stratton have yet to discuss a price, but the district recently received a fair market value estimate of \$852,000 for the property — \$528,000 for the land and \$342,000 for a 10,800-square-foot manufacturing facility on the site.

The district has several financing options, the most attractive of which is an interest-free loan through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act stimulus package, Weber said. The district has applied for the loan and received indications it is a promising candidate for the program, he said.

The district is also in a position to pay cash for the property from its fund equity account, Weber said.

Although there is no immediate need for what would be the sixth school building in the district, administrators said the Simplicity proving grounds, acquired by the Milwaukee-based Briggs & Stratton in 2004 as part of its Simplicity purchase, represents an opportunity that shouldn't be missed.

"Green space is so precious right now," Weber told the board's Building and Grounds Committee last month. "Let's not miss the opportunity we have now."

Current market conditions also make it a good time to buy property even if the district doesn't need to use it for a decade or longer, officials said. According to

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Written by Bill Schanen IV

Thursday, 10 December 2009 18:11

Froemming, the fair market value of the property has decreased \$150,000 since 2007.

Although the district owns 50 acres of undeveloped land in the City of Port Washington just north of Highway 33, the Simplicity property is a better site for a school because it is essentially flat, located between Port Washington and Saukville and has good access off Highway LL, Weber said.

The Simplicity site is small for a new high school, which requires at least 70 acres to accommodate a building, parking lots and athletic fields, but it is adjacent to undeveloped land the district could try to purchase.

The rolling property the district currently owns has limited access, is surrounded by subdivisions, and is generally considered an investment rather than a potential school site.

"I believe this is a nice piece of property for residential development," Weber said. "As the market continues its upward swing, I think we'll have people knocking on our door (to purchase it)."

The proving grounds, where lawn tractors and snowthrowers have been tested for decades, was identified as a potential school site by a district think tank created to study future school facility needs.

Froemming contacted Briggs & Stratton in November 2008 to express interest in the property, and received an indication that the company was interested in selling the land.

The Simplicity proving grounds represents the last vestige of a company founded in Port Washington that for decades made high-quality lawn tractors and snowthrowers here.

In October 2008, just four years after purchasing Simplicity Manufacturing, Briggs & Stratton closed the Port Washington factory on South Spring Street and moved operations out of state. The factory has since been sold and is being used primarily for storage.

Briggs & Stratton continues to use the proving grounds, and school officials have suggested the company could continue to use the property, perhaps through a

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lease or similar agreement, after the district purchases it.