

School Board says no to developer on land sale

Written by Steve Ostermann
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District officials tell Herro they want to keep acre near GES that he hoped to use to expand assisted-living facility

The Grafton School Board on Monday turned down a chance to sell an acre of land to a local developer who wanted to use it to expand an assisted-living facility near Grafton Elementary School.

However, school officials also received another request from the same developer to buy another nearby district parcel for the same purpose.

Late last year, Lew Herro proposed buying an acre to build an addition to Luella Heights, a 17-unit community-based residential facility he owns and operates at 1710 Washington St. The facility, which serves adults 55 and older who have special needs, is in a 11,300-square-foot building at the northeast corner of Washington Street and 17th Avenue.

Herro offered \$80,000 “as a starting point in negotiations” to acquire the parcel, which is north of Luella Heights and which the district subsequently had appraised at \$200,000.

The Finance Committee reviewed Herro’s offer, the appraisal and possible district uses of the land before recommending the district not proceed with negotiations, Board President Terry Ziegler said.

“It wasn’t really the difference in the dollar figures, but we just can’t be sure the district won’t need the land in the future,” he said.

In voting unanimously not to sell the land, board members cited expansion of the nearby Grafton High School tennis courts and parking at Grafton Elementary School as possible uses.

“With the economy the way it is, the appraisal may also be at the lowest ebb,” Ziegler said. “We have no real reason to sell it at this time.” Supt. Jeff Pechura concurred.

“It may be better to wait and see how the market as a whole affects the value of the land,” Pechura said.

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Herro said he understands the board's concerns and has made another proposal to buy a half-acre east of Luella Heights and along Washington Street for a smaller expansion.

In a letter to the board, he offered to begin negotiations for the land at about \$130,000, a figure he said was based on the appraisal the district received for the other parcel.

"The Board of Education is very well-qualified, and I'm not going to second-guess them," Herro said of Monday's decision not to sell the acre.

"Our hope is still to build an addition, and this new property wouldn't be anywhere near the tennis courts."

Herro said he approached the district about acquiring land north of Luella Heights because it would have provided room for another 17 living units in the facility.

"No one in the school district has talked about using that land for the last 40 years, so we thought it would be available and that this would be a good use for it," he said.

"We still think this project is the right thing for the area."

The board referred Herro's latest proposal to the Finance Committee.

"I don't foresee the committee making a recommendation to sell that land either, but we'll have to wait and see," Pechura said.