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Retirement community no longer in plan for State School land

By RICK GREEN, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN Dec 4, 2018 Updated 11 hrs ago



The dilapidated Keyes Building at the former State School when the tract gets developed. (File photo by Rick Green)

LACONIA — After pushback from city officials and a retirement community as part of the plan for 200 acres of land for developmentally disabled people.



The Lakeshore Redevelopment Planning Commission listened Tuesday to a consultant's report for a "hybrid option" that included about 200 homes, 120 apartment units, a sports facility, 10,000 square feet of retail, 10,000 square feet of office space, a 100,000-square-foot health care facility and a 150-room hotel.

Some of the land would be left in open space and some would be put to agricultural use, with the possibility that produce could be sold in a kind of farmers market or prepared in a farm-to-table restaurant. A park could also be created.

An advertisement for Bank of New Hampshire Home Equity Loans. The background features a young boy with glasses and a graduation cap, sitting and reading a book. The text is overlaid on the image. At the top, it says "Use the equity in your home" in red. Below that, "HOME EQUITY LOANS" is written in large, bold, red letters. A list of uses includes "Home Improvements", "Dream Vacation", "Education Costs", and "Debt Consolidation". The Bank of New Hampshire logo is on the left, with the website "BankNH.com" and phone number "1.800.832.0912" below it. A "Member FDIC" logo is at the bottom left. On the right, there is a "NORTH HAMPSHIRE LENDER" logo. At the bottom, a red banner contains the text "View Rates or Apply Today!" in white.

The consultant even mentioned the possibility of "glamping," a combination of glamour and camping, where people stay overnight in a natural area to enjoy the beauty of a site, while enjoying good food and cozy accommodations.

Trails leading from the State School property to nearby 128-acre Ahern State Park would be preserved.

Options discussed at previous meetings included age-restricted housing and a senior living center.

At a Sept. 18 commission meeting, Mayor Ed Engler objected, saying the city is trying to attract younger families, not more retirees, and that if the land couldn't be turned into an economic engine under current market conditions, it would be better to hold off on development.

Consultants have said it's unlikely to find a large company or manufacturer to come in and use most of the land.

After Tuesday's meeting, Commissioner Robert Cheney acknowledged that plans have moved away from a senior community in favor of some type of health care facility.

“It is certainly not the focus anymore,” he said. “Based on the comments that we heard from the mayor, we are more looking at the health-care type of facility. We don’t know what that is. It’s kind of a placeholder. Hopefully, people will come in and express interest.”

Consultants from Camoin Associates have said that constructing more housing, particularly starter homes, could help build a stronger local workforce and indirectly contribute to economic development.

Proposals for a resort hotel, a big sports center and a medical facility have the potential for helping the local economy, but these plans remain vague and it’s not clear whether developers would be interested.

On Tuesday, Alan Mountjoy, of the NBBJ consulting firm, also proposed preserving 10 of the 29 buildings on the site.

The names of buildings not on the list for preservation were Rice, Peterson, King, Felker, Powell, Toll, Quinby, Powell and Pig House. Those on the list for preservation were Water Towers, Baker, Blood, Keyes, Spaulding, Boiler House, Dwinell, Warehouse, Greenhouse and Speare.

A committee is being formed to discuss the best way to memorialize the history of the State School. One of the preserved buildings could be used for this purpose.

Some of the other historic buildings could be converted to new uses, including possibly a boutique resort hotel.

Environmental testing is now being done on the land.

Wells are being drilled to look for underground pollution. Later, test pits will be dug and ground-penetrating radar will be used to determine what may lie beneath the surface.

One unsettling possibility is that there may be skeletons of former school residents buried on the land.

The school was founded in 1901, but did not have a dedicated cemetery until 1941. A report by the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources said that before the cemetery was opened, residents were buried in unmarked graves on school grounds.

No paper trail has emerged as to where these unmarked graves may be located.

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Cheney met Tuesday with Elizabeth H. Muzzey, the state historic preservation officer, who will lend expertise as excavation work is done.

An archeologist will be present when test pits are dug and could be present if any bones are unearthed.

“That is one of the considerations that any archeologist would have to consider in reviewing this site, the potential for whether there are any burial plots on the property,” he said.

The next public meeting of the Lakeshore Redevelopment Planning Commission was set for 9 a.m. on Dec. 20 at Rist-Frost-Shumway Engineering, 71 Water St., Laconia.

MORE INFORMATION

A year in, more questions than answers for State School land