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

By RICK GREEN, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN Dec 6, 2018 Updated 11 hrs ago

LACONIA — After more than a year of meetings, a state panel charged with turning the old Laconia State School site into a jobs generator has more questions than answers.

Will developers be interested in implementing whatever plans the Lakeshore Redevelopment Planning Commission finally draws up for the 200 acres of land at Meredith Center Road and North Main Street?

To answer that question, Commissioner Gino Baroni, of Trident Project Advisors and Development Group, suggested at the commission meeting Tuesday that commercial real estate brokers be retained to render an opinion.

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The commission is moving forward with a plan that includes about 200 homes. 120 apartment units. a sports facility, 10,000 square feet of retail space, a 100,000 square-foot health care facility and a 150-room For US Consumers

“We’re presupposing what will sell in Laconia, we don’t know what the market thinks, not what I think or what you think.”

“We can think a lot of great things, but if the market is not there, it’s not wonderful plan, nicely colored, and it will be for nothing.”



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The first consultant retained by the commission, Camoin Associates, did a market study showing high demand for housing, moderate demand for retail and resort/conference space and limited demand for speculative industrial and office buildings.

The Lakes Region is suffering from a workforce shortage and there are not enough starter homes and apartments affordable for workers. Camoin made the point that adding housing could boost workforce and indirectly meet the commission's goal of generating jobs.

Russ Thibeault, president of Laconia-based Applied Economic Research, said housing seems like an obvious choice.

"It's the low hanging fruit of the site," he said. "It's a gorgeous site."

He said it would be good to have brokers render an opinion.

"The more observations you have, the better," Thibeault said. "So getting more input is seldom a mistake. The challenging part would be to convey to any third party at this point what the site will be like when it is ready. It's kind of like looking at a house in tough shape and envisioning how it will be when it is cleaned up."

Cleaning up the site, or at least knowing what needs to be cleaned up, is a priority for the commission.

Commission member Robert Cheney said more than \$150,000 in federal money is being spent to assess underground conditions. Test wells are being drilled and pits will be dug to see what is below the surface. One area on the southwest corner of the site appears to contain underground rubbish or demolition debris, but it's not clear what else may be there.

An archeologist will be present when the pits are dug. There is the possibility of unmarked graves somewhere on the land, which was once home to a school for the developmentally disabled. A more thorough historical survey, also using an archeologist, will need to be undertaken.

A study will likely be done to assess demand for a major youth sports facility suggested for the site. An examination may be done regarding the agricultural potential of the land.

A committee is being formed to come up with a plan on how to memorialize the history of the State School, which was founded in 1901 as a school for what was then called, "the feeble-minded."

Also still to be resolved is how the commission will be able to see any plan brought to fruition.

“As with everything else that seems to be occurring, nothing is simple,” Cheney said. “It’s a little bit complicated.

“Once you have a plan, a concept, how do you go forward and implement it? Does that mean the state sells the property, does that mean the state retains the property in a Pease-like development authority, or some other alternative? If you were to sell, what kind of agreements would you need to ensure what you plan is what the developer develops once you sell the property.”

The commission has formed a subcommittee to investigate implementation, or final disposition, issues.

George Bald, the chairman of the commission and former director of the Pease Development Authority, said his is the fourth group to write up a plan for the future of the State School property.

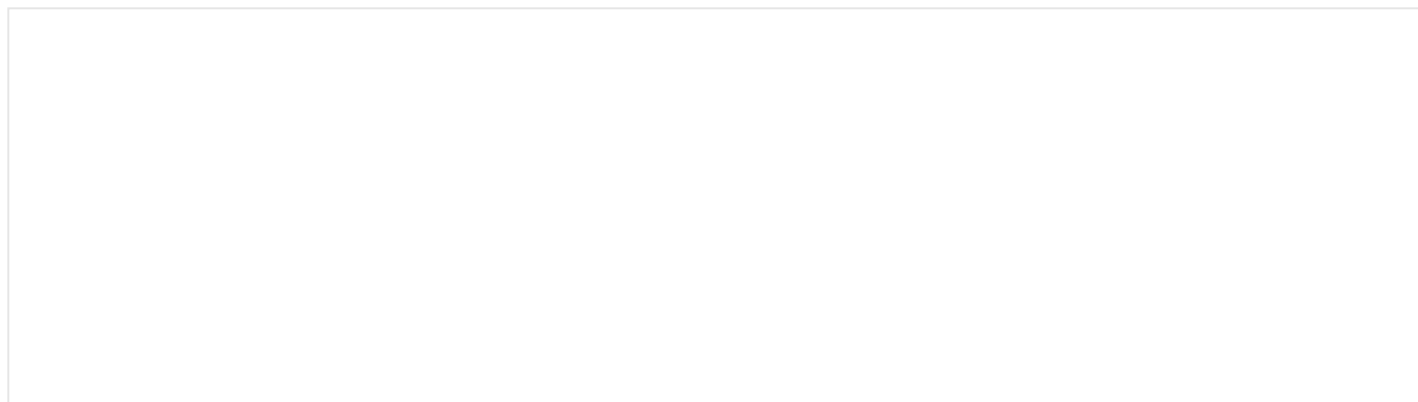
He said that every one of the commissioners is committed to making sure plans for the land are implemented.

Bald compared the complexity of the commission’s task to the interviewing technique on an old television detective show.

“I’ve found in this committee or on this site – those of you who are old enough to remember this – it’s like Columbo would always say, ‘Just one more thing, sir.’

“There is always one more thing and one more thing, but as we take care of these things, it will give us a better shot. We’ll prime the pump and when activities start to take place, it will really will snowball.”

MORE INFORMATION





Retirement community no longer in plan for State School land

Unmarked graves a possibility at State School site

Study to look at cleanup requirements for State School property