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Redevelopment authority delays land sale

By Paul Sunyak, Herald-Standard
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Seeking to maximize the potential of a 32-acre tract in North Union Township, the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority voted Tuesday to postpone selling the Route 40 acreage until an engineer looks at subdividing the property.

The authority board, which met in executive session Monday to discuss the tract's fate, reasoned that splitting the parcel into smaller chunks may create more demand and make better overall use of the acreage.

"We've had inquiries over whether or not it can be split," said Raymond C. Polaski, authority executive director. He added that thus far the authority has had a "rigid" approach, seeking to sell the land as a single tract.

Board member James Woleslagle noted that given the dearth of competitive offers for the land, it might make sense to split it into two 15-acre sections - or even into three parcels of smaller size.

"We haven't had any great results on this," said Woleslagle of the marketing effort to date. "Obviously, we're not having too much success going down this road."

Woleslagle suggested having an engineer look into the feasibility of carving up the tract into more marketable sections. The board unanimously adopted his motion to that effect, which delays taking any sales action until completion of the engineering review.

Polaski said that the most recent advertisement of the land's availability attracted one interested buyer - Null Land Co.

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Inc., the same company that had apparently won the right to purchase the land a couple of years ago at \$20,000 per acre.

However, Polaski said that Null eventually backed off a plan to develop the entire tract in three phases. Polaski said that Null wanted - and still wants - to develop a portion of the property. But he said the authority soured on selling the entire tract to Null when it became apparent that the more comprehensive development wasn't in the cards.

Part of the potential negotiation with Null involves a possible land swap or sale involving the authority, said Polaski. Null owns a sizeable adjoining tract that it purchased from the county back in 1995 to build the Hampton Inn.

Also at Tuesday's meeting, the board heard an update from Polaski and assistant executive director Andrew French regarding the quest for up to \$500,000 in new funding through the state Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program.

French said that the state Department of Community and Economic Development has made the authority aware of the program, which has two main criteria: funded improvements must benefit families that have children under age 18, and a \$3 match of local resources must accompany every TANF dollar spent.

However, French said the state has indicated that it will have a "liberal interpretation" of the local match, meaning that authority and water and sewerage projects could likely count in the tally.

Polaski said that the big hitch is that the authority must expend any TANF money within a year of its award, which sounds easy in theoretic terms but is often hard in a practical sense. He said it takes time to nurture any program from the application stage to the final payment to contractor stage.

Polaski said another challenge for the authority is finding areas where it already has projects on the drawing board and culling those for families with children under the age limit. He mentioned the Smock and Smock Hill areas as potential targets, but noted that senior citizens comprise many of those households.

Regarding an internal operations matter, Polaski said the authority's single audit recommended improvement in two areas: instituting a single fixed asset schedule and developing a better cost allocation plan for overhead. He said the authority has implemented changes to strengthen those areas.

"These are not at all big things," said Polaski.

In other matters, the board:

? Awarded two demolition and site clearance contracts to Mark McNabb's J&S Excavating of Burgettstown. One was \$9,000 for a property in the New Salem area of Menallen Township and the other was \$3,000 for a property in the Republic area of Redstone Township.

??Approved two loan subordinations: one for Lisa Hazelbaker of Fayette City, who has a \$15,000 authority loan on a property appraised at \$52,000; and the other for Roberta L. Berger of Smock, who has a \$5,343 authority loan on a farm appraised at \$155,000.

Polaski termed the Berger loan "odd" in that it "remains on the books from prior days" when the authority offered forgiveness loans that don't require payback. That is no longer the case, said Polaski.

??Awarded five contracts: one for a waterline extension in Georges Township; three for road improvement projects in

Dunbar, Bullskin and Menallen townships; and one for parking lot improvements at the Smithfield Borough Library/Community Center.

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