

# Aurora and Bainbridge meet behind closed doors about Cedar Fair land

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN | Posted: Wednesday, May 17, 2017 11:45 pm

Representatives of Bainbridge and the city of Aurora met in an executive session May 11 at Bainbridge Town Hall to discuss a joint economic development district for the former Geauga Lake Park property owned by Cedar Fair of Sandusky.

“From my view, we had a positive meeting with good dialogue and communication,” Trustee Kristina O’Brien said.

Representatives from the two communities have been at odds over details of the JEDD including how much territory the district should cover and how the tax revenue should be divided.

Cedar Fair owns about 650 acres that spans both Bainbridge and in Aurora. In a JEDD, the two communities would join to collect income tax from employees at businesses to be developed on the property. Townships cannot by state law collect income taxes on their own and must work with a municipality to do so.

“Aurora and Bainbridge finally defined where we all need to be, Mrs. O’Brien said. “The communication and dialogue is good. Somehow this can work.”

Aurora representatives at the May 11 meeting included Mayor Ann Womer Benjamin and the city’s Law Director Dean DePiero. Bainbridge representatives included Township Trustees Mrs. O’Brien, Lorrie Benza, and Jeff Markley along with legal counsel Chuck Riehl and Geauga County Assistant Prosecutor Bridey Matheney.

Mrs. Benza said there was a good discussion and the two side will meet again on May 22.

The JEDD with Aurora has long been discussed among the leaders of both communities. In 2013, former Aurora Mayor James Fisher signed a memorandum of understanding, as did Bainbridge trustees, she noted. The memorandum “identified the willingness of both communities to work together for the establishment of compatible zoning provisions and design criteria,” Mrs. Benza said.

Since then, Aurora voters approved the city’s master plan and rezoning of the area. “Bainbridge followed suit and rezoned the former commercial recreation district to a mixed-use area, favoring a ‘live, work, play’ approach,” Mrs. Benza explained.

Mr. DePiero said this week that the meetings were positive from the perspective of Aurora officials. “There is a real desire to get a deal done. I’m cautiously optimistic. I do wish there was more movement from the township.”

“We have had some good discussions,” Mr. DePiero said. There have been a number of different proposals from the city to get the deal done, he said. “We have moved significantly from our initial offer however the city can only go so far.

Mr. DePiero also referred to an earlier agreement concerning the city providing utilities to the areas on Aurora Road in Bainbridge. He noted that the agreement does not require the city to give access to sewers and water. "We may if we want to, however, we have to cover our costs."

Recently, Aurora officials hedged on the extent of the JEDD which could lower the amount of tax collections Bainbridge would receive.

In the meantime, many people have questioned the status of the Meijer superstore plans for 41 acres of the Cedar Fair property fronting on Aurora Road (Route 43) on the Bainbridge side. It would be in the area of the parking lot of Geauga Lake Park which closed in 2007. The superstore project needs water and sewer service from Aurora.

Mrs. Benza recounted the chronology of events related to consideration for the Meijer development. "As Bainbridge Township was planning and drafting the zoning regulations for the mixed-use district, Cedar Fair officials had begun discussions with Meijer representatives," she said.

"The new zoning plan did not permit big-box retail establishments, so under the newer zoning, Meijer would have been prohibited," Mrs. Benza said. "That prohibition prompted a call for legal action against the township by Cedar Fair. With Cedar Fair poised to initiate litigation that would no doubt take years to resolve, the parties decided to pursue a resolution that could not only avoid more delays, but also benefit the community," she said.

"Everyone agreed to avoid protracted litigation and decided to handle one more big-box store," Mrs. Benza said. "A primary goal was to get some kind of development on the land that has remained barren for so long. So we carved out an exception that would allow Meijer to submit a zoning application, with the stipulation that certain conditions would need to be met. Among them, Meijer would participate in development standards to reflect the nostalgia of the former Geauga Lake them park, and they will participate in a joint economic development district with Bainbridge township under reasonable terms," she said.

As to a JEDD with Aurora, "Nothing says it has to be with Aurora. It could with any legally allowable community," Mrs. Benza said. "But we feel it makes the most sense to do it with Aurora, given the 2013 (memorandum of understanding) in which Aurora and Bainbridge Committed to work together for the cohesive development of the property."

Trustees say they believe Meijer could proceed now, while discussions about JEDD terms continue. Mrs. Benza said trustees have asked their legal counsel to ensure Meijer and Cedar Fair representatives have that same understanding. Discussions will continue later this month.