

# Cedar Fair meets trustees in Bainbridge

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN | Posted: Wednesday, July 5, 2017 11:45 pm

Bainbridge Trustees met face to face Friday with a representative of Cedar Fair, owner of the former Geauga Lake Park property, as well as with members of Hanna Commercial. The company has several potential buyers interested in the Cedar Fair property, they said.

Cedar Fair requested the meeting, according to township trustees. Cedar Fair owns about 650 acres that spans Bainbridge and Aurora. Hanna Commercial representatives did not disclose the potential buyers interested in the property.

The meeting concluded with the agreements by all that there is a lot of work to be done with development of the now-vacant property and they have to work together. Sean Wall of Hanna Commercial told township trustees they are looking at how to work together to get the Cedar Fair property sold and developed.

Much of last week's discussion focused on the issue of logging on Cedar Fair property. A 44-acre site is covered by a court judgment entry, requiring it to be left in its natural state. It serves as a buffer between homes in the area and the former Geauga Lake Park, Sea World and Wild Water Kingdom. Last month's logging negatively affected relations between Cedar Fair and the township, according to township trustees.

Hanna Commercial representative Tony Visconsi said, "We've got a lot of interest by five different entities."

And there are some who want to buy smaller properties, he said. "We thought the best way to approach this is as a team," he said.

There is interest in offices, industry, some retail and residential, but not in multi-family housing, according to Mr. Visconsi.

The joint economic development district in which Bainbridge and Aurora could share income taxes from employees of businesses in the area is yet to be worked out between the two communities. It would resolve the issue of sewers and water for the property. That matter must be resolved, he said.

In a JEDD agreement between Bainbridge and Aurora, the city would collect income taxes on the Bainbridge side and share it with the township. Townships by law cannot collect income taxes and must join with a municipality.

Discussions on the JEDD by trustees were held over a month ago with Aurora, and a revised JEDD agreement has been provided to the township by its legal counsel and trustees are currently reviewing it, Bainbridge Trustee Jeff Markley said.

Trustees said at the meeting that discussions over the JEDD stopped after the trees were logged in June on the Cedar Fair property. Nearby residents alerted the township to the illegal logging.

"At that point we had plenty to do with the logging issue and the logging made us seriously question the intentions of Cedar Fair," Mr. Markley said. Personally, he said, his attention was diverted to what the intentions of the logging were and how to fix it, and "I was not comfortable with advancing a JEDD that would benefit Cedar Fair," he said.

Duff Milkie, representing Cedar Fair last week, said the JEDD has been “kicked around for over a year. It’s a road block.” Talks on the JEDD have stopped because of the tree cutting and that “is disappointing,” he said. It is counterproductive to what they want to achieve, Mr. Milkie said.

Regarding the JEDD, Mr. Markley said Aurora had contracted for utilities for the entire area, and subsequently refused service unless the terms of the JEDD were negotiated in the city’s favor. “Cedar Fair wants us to finalize the JEDD which serves their interests but is somehow unaware of illegal clearing of trees in a protected property. It makes it difficult for me to focus on advancing the economic development opportunities that exist for the entire property when the entities have different agendas.”

Mr. Milkie noted that Cedar Fair has worked with both communities on a master plan for the property in attempts to move forward on the development of the properties.

In reference to the logging, he said, the logging company got on the property and cut trees. “There is no evidence whatsoever that we allowed them. We’re not in the logging business.”

Trustee Lorrie Benza questioned how someone was able to get on the property with logging equipment without someone unlocking the gates to the property and without Cedar Fair’s knowledge. If someone is illegally cutting trees, she said, the township had to look into the matter.

Mrs. Benza said as well that she does not understand why the logger went to the township zoning office and had an understanding that it could proceed.

Mr. Milkie said it was all an error and was not approved by Cedar Fair. The gate was not locked because someone else had previously gone in to get stone and did not lock it upon leaving. The subsequent logging was a mistake on the logging company’s part, he said. Logging was to have been done at a former camp ground owned by Cedar Fair off Treat Road in Aurora.

Mr. Milkie said it was caught in time and the property was not clear cut. It is repairable, he said.

Residents however question how 150-year-old trees can be replaced and also questioned how the gate was left unlocked.

Township Trustee Kristina O’Brien said she would like to see the buffer property repaired and the matter remediated. “And the relationship has to go forward in a business manner,” she noted.

Mr. Milkie said they are looking into the matter, adding, “It is unfair to say we facilitated this. I think we have shown cooperation with the township over time.” The logging was an unfortunate incident and should not stand in the way of the progress at hand, he said.

Residents asked about criminal charges with regard to the logging, but there was no response.

Mr. Milkie speaking on the JEDD said it is key to getting development on the acreage that is up for sale. “It has to happen,” he said. And without utilities it can’t happen, Mr. Milkie added. “Developers don’t like uncertainty, and the JEDD is key,” he said. “We’ve had more interest in the property than in the last few years.”

Mr. Wall said they think they could be 30 to 60 days from a deal with a buyer. He said the JEDD must be moved along otherwise they will develop on the Aurora property rather than the land in Bainbridge. He asked what steps can be taken to get back on track.

Trustees reviewed the JEDD process, which if not unanimously voted on by township trustees could go to the voters and they discussed the deadlines for getting it on the ballot for November.

Mr. Markley said the trustees had assumed water and sewers were available through Aurora, but city representatives are now saying they could or could not be if the JEDD deal isn't right with them. Aurora is saying it has no obligation to provide the utilities and that puts the township in a weaker position, Mr. Markley said.

As a result, township trustees are looking at all options for sewer and water, he said. Sewers and water exist on the property or are adjacent from the market place site. The trustees are trying to ensure they are available to future users, Mr. Markley said.

Mrs. Benza also noted that Aurora will not make the existing sewers and water available to the mixed use district until they work out the JEDD. The intent since 2003, when an agreement was signed between the Geauga County Water Resources Department and Aurora is that the city would make sewers available to the Geauga Lake area. It was only when the township and city could not agree on the JEDD that sewer and water availability was cut off by Aurora, she said.

Trustees explained and relayed the history of the utilities issue with the new Cedar Fair marketing team, and they shared the obstacles they say the township has faced in trying to get the property sold and redeveloped.

"I believe the Hanna Commercial representatives left with an appreciation for the challenges that the trustees have faced in order to facilitate the sale and redevelopment of the property," Mr. Markley said.

If utilities are not provided, and Aurora charges more for utilities going to the Bainbridge side, the Aurora side is more attractive, he added.

Mr. Milkie said they all have a common goal with the township that the entire property be treated fairly with respect to utility access and rates. It is a shared goal, he said.

Cedar Fair desires that the JEDD discussions continue so that they can sell the property for development that would benefit the community, Mr. Milkie said. If the JEDD conditions are agreed to, utilities would be available, he said.

Mrs. Benza said the township has tried to communicate with Aurora and noted that Bainbridge can pursue a JEDD with other municipalities. She added that the land is recognized as "absolutely beautiful."

"We encourage those discussions be restarted," Mr. Milkie said of talks with Aurora. "Maybe getting face to face again would help." He encouraged them to do so with Aurora.

Mrs. Benza said she also needs to hear that remediation of the logging is done on the property. Mr. Milkie said he would get in touch with the logger.

Michael Vary, a neighbor of the Cedar Fair property, suggested another meeting between the Cedar Fair employee who oversees the property during the day and the logger to get an understanding how it happened. The question is not being answered on what is to be done with the logger and trespassing, he said.

Mr. Markley said it is in the hands of the attorneys to sort out, to which Mr. Vary said, “We residents want to know.” He also questioned who is benefiting from the sale of the logs.

Resident Dennis Silvia said residents of the area often feel like the “toss away” part of the township. The Cedar Fair property is poorly maintained since the parks were closed, he noted. Buildings on the site are falling apart and it is not the perception that is wanted for the area. He said the JEDD would have to benefit the residents and township as well as the quality of life perspective.

Asked by resident Ted Seliga about the best way to bring sewers and water to the Cedar Fair property, Mr. Markley said there are four options for sewers with the best one being with Aurora. If the township goes with someone else, it would have to work with the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency or the Northeast Ohio Area Wide Coordinating Agency to change the existing service area. That could take about a year, he said.

Resident Dan Henry, who also questioned the logging operations, noted they were stopped but were allowed to take the logs off the property. “It seemed like they had permission from someone.” He also thanked township trustees for holding the meeting.

Mr. Vary questioned if there were any buffer areas the township was interested in buying for protection of residential areas. There have been no formal offers, but if there were proposals, they would look into them, Markley said.