

Pulte officials discuss parklands around Aurora development

Joan Demirjian Jul 4, 2019

AURORA — Representatives of the Pulte Group met late last month with city officials to further discuss details of a proposed mixed-use development on sections of the former Sea World site.

The proposed site for the new development in Aurora is adjacent to the former Geauga Lake Amusement Park in Bainbridge and next to the River's Edge residential community in the township.

Plans call for 321 houses on 111 acres that include an old stone quarry and a former campground off Treat Road. Overall, the land includes 241 acres. The land is owned by Cedar Fair of Sandusky, Ohio.

During the June 19 meeting, Pulte Homes representative James O'Conner said the parklands in the plan would include about 112 acres surrounding the homes and commercial development.

Mr. O'Conner said he was surprised by some negative comments about the parks. The former parking area is dilapidated now, and it would be an improvement, he added.

Parks create legacies and are used by residents for active recreation, including walking, biking and walking dogs. Those are the elements Pulte has in mind for its park plans, he said. "It's a regional benefit."

The quarry is a captivating jewel of the area, and an unused railroad line could be turned into a walking trail in the future, he said. The rail line borders Bainbridge Township.

The preservation of trees and green space will be a benefit to the area, Mr. O'Conner said, and buffer the houses from the streets.

There could be a network of paths with just over a mile in length and it would be enclosed in a natural wooded environment.

Aurora Planning Commission member Sarah Gilmore said she would like to see larger home sites and less parkland. Mr. O’Conner said that is not being considered at this point.

Resident Deb Conti questioned the parklands saying that with a lot of wetlands, insurance will escalate. The city already has a lot of green space, she said.

Aurora Planning Director Denise Januska said a concern is what the area of parkland would look like and how would it change when houses are built. She mentioned concerns for the run-off materials from fertilizer from the housing into the quarry.

Pulte plans to turn the parklands over to the city, she said, and that needs a lot of discussion.

Dan Neff, of Neff and Associates engineers, speaking for Pulte, said surprisingly very little land drains to the quarry. “The drainage goes off in the other direction.”

Mr. O’Conner said Pulte will hire a landscape architect to do the fundamentals for developing the parkland.

Cedar Fair owns 650 acres in Aurora and Bainbridge and Pulte is concentrating on the 246 acres for its homes, retail and office buildings, including medical offices, in Aurora. The city has zoned the property for mixed use. There are about 270 acres of Cedar Fair land in Bainbridge, which are also zoned for mixed use.

The western portion of the land Pulte wants to develop will include housing for first-time home buyers, young professionals and those with young families, Mr. O’Conner said. The eastern end, off Treat Road, would be geared to “empty nesters” with smaller ranch homes.

A 20-acre parcel next to Liberty Ford would be designated for commercial use. Mr. Neff said developers are concentrating on the office and medical buildings. The retail and commercial areas would include businesses geared to the neighborhood.

Since the last meeting before the planning commission, the plans for the commercial buildings have been moved to the corner of Aurora Road (Route 43) and Treat Road. The medical and professional offices would then be built off Squires Road.

The small retail stores would be within walking distance to the homes, Mr. Neff noted. They are smaller scale buildings with pedestrian and bike connections. They won't be large expanses of walls and frontages.

Off Squires Road, adjacent to the housing on the west side of the parcel, medical and other offices would be developed. There would be buffering for the homes, Mr. O'Conner said. It would not be built on a speculative basis, and could sit open for several years. It is too early to tell if there would be an emergency room facility at the site, he said.

They are not looking to develop shopping as with the nearby Marketplace at Four Corners Shopping Center, with "chopped up parcels and different uses," he said. "We're looking at more neighborhood uses and not big-box uses. There is no room in the market for that."

A representative of Liberty Ford said the dealership's goal is to be an anchor for other development.

Tony Visconsi with Hanna Commercial Real Estate has been working with Cedar Fair for several years to "put this project together." A commercial area at the corner of Treat and Aurora roads is very appropriate, he said.

He also noted that the balance of the Cedar Fair property in Bainbridge would lend itself to commercial, not residential.

Jack Burge, director of economic development for the city of Aurora, said he likes the project. "This makes a lot of sense for this piece of property."

Planning commission member Laura Duguay said there are a lot of empty commercial spaces in Aurora and she questioned what makes the Pulte plan different.

Mr. Burge said there are closings, but there is not a day that goes by that he doesn't have people asking about empty spaces in the city. "Retail comes and goes," he said, adding, "We don't have a lot of spaces empty. Everything fills in." Pulte will have to find tenants before building, he noted.

Kathi Grandillo, chairwoman of the planning commission, said the plan still has to go through reviews by Aurora City Council. It will be a long process, she said.

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