

The Times/Courier, July 16/17, 2020 Bainbridge hopeful for JEDD with Aurora at Geauga Lake property

By SAMANTHA COTTRILL

— After months of meetings regarding reopened discussions with the City of Aurora about a joint economic development district, known as a JEDD, the township trustees said they are optimistic about potential development opportunities on the Geauga Lake property. In a regular meeting Monday, broadcast via Zoom with the allowance for in-person attendees, the trustees announced that the final paperwork for the JEDD has been submitted to Aurora, the neighboring city that shares a portion of the Geauga Lake property. Back in March, Trustee Jeff Markley shared a vision statement for the former Geauga Lakes Amusement Park, which closed in 2007, and the trustees entered into a memorandum of understanding with Industrial Commercial Properties, LLC of Solon and the City of Aurora for exploring options of development and utilities on the property. This was almost two months after the township Board of Zoning Appeals denied several variance requests on Jan. 16 that ICP needed for their development of the Geauga Lake property, a mixed-use planned unit development district, or MUP. ICP was under contract to purchase 276 acres of the property from Cedar Fairs and submitted variance requests to allow heavy retail and multi-family dwelling apartments with first floor residential use, area variances for the allowance of 50,000-plus-square-foot lots and setback variances to allow private use within 500 feet of Geauga Lake. After the denial of their variance requests, ICP filed an administrative appeal with the Geauga County Court of Common Pleas. The township has been in talks with the involved parties since, including the discussions of the JEDD with Aurora. “That document (for the JEDD) has been back

and forth for a number of months, and even years if you want to go back to some of the first drafts that we initiated,” Mr. Markley said. “The language is all in there as to what Aurora can expect from Bainbridge, and at this point it’s now in Aurora’s court to complete this and allow us to actively proceed with potential development opportunities, significant development opportunities.” “An exciting development opportunity,” Trustee Lorrie Sass Benza said. “Which we’re anxious to share,” Mr. Markley said. The trustees said they could not disclose any further information on the agreement and the development opportunity or buyer just yet, as discussions are still occurring in executive sessions with involved parties. “It’s just so exciting, the idea to see something happen on that property that has stood [idle] for so long,” Mrs. Benza said. Mr. Markley agreed, noting the property has become an “eyesore” to surrounding communities. “This is a really exciting opportunity,” Mrs. Benza said, “and I think we’re all very optimistic and all very hopeful...” “That Aurora will get it done,” Mr. Markley concluded. Mr. Markley said Aurora City Council is expected to review the JEDD at a July 20 meeting. In other news, the trustees agreed to pursue the development of an architectural review board for the township. Mr. Markley said this matter has been on his “back-burners” for quite some time. “There is a section in the Ohio Revised Code that is absolutely appropriate and pertinent to township architectural review. Some of the challenges that we faced are, under judgement entry, the township trustees approved architectural [standards], and sometimes the zoning inspector approves architectural [standards]. Sometimes the [Board of Zoning Appeals] approves architectural [standards],” he explained. “I think there [are] a lot of different entities involved in reviewing and trying to determine architectural standards for the township.” With the township embarking on different projects from the potential for developing the Geauga Lake property to the construction of a Chipotle Mexican Grill at the former Steak ‘n

Shake on Aurora Road, he said, “it’s probably a good time” to consider the implementation of a review board. “This would involve actually creating a separate body, not something that’s tied to the Zoning Commission, a separate body made up of some experts,” he said. “The statute requires an architect or an engineer, and I would recommend both at a minimum. It’s a recommending body, not a statutory body, to the zoning inspector.” Trustee Chairwoman Kristina O’Brien noted that with this process, there are no surprises when dealing with architectural standards. “There are no surprises,” Mr. Markley agreed, “and you’re starting to establish the standards by which the developments are moving forward. So, I think it’s something I would like us strongly to consider.” He said he has no problem with sitting on the board of trustees and working with architectural standards, “but future boards may not have that capability. We have a really good BZA and zoning commission composition, I think we can do the same with architectural [review].”