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Bainbridge talks fire safety on proposed apartments

Sam Cottrill
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BAINBRIDGE — The township may set the tone for multifamily residential units in the county, but not without extensive discussion on fire safety and prevention on such a development.

“Bainbridge [has] tried to be a community that welcomes economic development. We welcome the opportunity,” Trustee Chairman Jeff Markley said, “and we’re trying to figure out for Geauga Lake, specifically, what fits out there.”

Vision Development, a real estate development company from the greater Columbus area, is proposing approximately 19.6 acres of about 300 multifamily use dwellings on the Geauga Lake property. While no official plans have come forward, Mr. Markley explained that the company has presented several iterations of potential multi-dwelling structures to the trustees in informal work sessions.

In a special meeting on Feb. 19, the developers met with Mr. Markley, Trustee Krisitina O’Brien and Assistant Fire Chief Bill Lovell to discuss fire safety concerns the entities may have on potential fire prevention systems in the proposed structures before any plans are to move forward.

“We’ve had versions of plans come to the township, and we’re certainly excited about the opportunity,” Mr. Markley said. “We know that there’s value for the community to have a different type of housing stock in the community. We don’t have much in the way of rental opportunities in the township other than single family homes.”

The word “apartment” tends to have a negative connotation, Mr. Markley told the developers, explaining that the township is working to set the project up for success in the township.

“If we can get past that and recognize this as a very, very suitable product – residential product – for a community that is not used to having multifamily [dwellings] like this, then let’s send a new message and set a new tone for residential living,” he said.

Mrs. O'Brien emphasized the importance of working with their safety services on new concepts.

"In the township, this doesn't exist," she said. "We are learning. We have to work with the safety services we have to make sure these are done right."

Bainbridge trustees currently are in closed door negotiations with Solon developer Industrial Commercial Properties, LLC, under pending litigation for about 375 acres of the Geauga Lake property within the township.

The trustees said in an information session on Feb. 16 that the entities are working through a consent judgment entry for the development of the mixed-use property once home to the former Geauga Lake amusement park, which could include the multifamily residential units, shops, restaurants and public parks.

Construction for a Menards Home Improvement store is also underway at the property on Aurora Road after the township and ICP entered a public-private partnership for the development of the big-box store.

Current unofficial iterations of Vision Property's multi-dwelling plan show a three-story structure with a four-story townhouse. Architect Branko Stankovic of DSA Architects, who attended the meeting via phone call, said the developers are approaching the project as a 5A-type construction with two enclosed stair shafts on either side of the building.

As 5A, the structure would be made of a protected wood frame, made primarily of unexposed and treated wood. This type of construction is commonly found in newer apartment buildings.

Mr. Stankovic said with this current approach, the dwellings would have 13R sprinkler systems under the National Fire Protection Association, or NFPA.

Another structure includes a three-story building without a four-story townhouse with a single stair shaft. Mr. Stankovic said this would also require a 13R sprinkler system.

An NFPA 13R sprinkler system, Asst. Chief Lovell said, is designed to buy time for people to exit a structure in the event of a fire, but doesn't do much for saving the structure itself. An NFPA 13 does both by slowing the spread of a fire.

“Whatever you build, we either have to be able to protect it or find a way to make it so that the risk is less,” Asst. Chief Lovell told the developers.

“And, at least, protect the people that are occupying that space,” Mr. Markley added.

“Type 5 is a wood structure,” Asst. Chief Lovell said. “Firemen don’t like wood, obviously. It burns.”

Asst. Chief Lovell showed several instances of similar apartment buildings both local and across the country that have succumbed to fires within the last year. He noted that he couldn’t say for certain that every example he showed utilized a 13R sprinkler system, but they had similar structures to Vision Development’s current proposed designs with void spaces toward the top floors of the buildings.

“Fire service has concerns about that construction, regardless,” he said. “All the videos that I had on that list there in the six-month period in 2020 that I looked at had similar type structures with spectacular fires.”

He said his concerns were not to discredit the developers, but to help them see their planning from a safety service perspective. He ran through possible alterations the developers could incorporate into their planning, like fire stops that could be installed above stoves, noting cooking fires account for 73 percent fires in multifamily dwellings, or standpipes and common hallway smoke detectors, as opposed to per-unit detectors that may only warn the residents of a specific unit.

“If you can take this as constructively as possible, it’s the idea of how do you build something with the techniques that you guys currently use to mitigate [potential fires],” Mr. Markley told the developers. “Maybe your practices already do that, and you just need to articulate that to [Asst. Chief Lovell] so that he can share that with us. And if that’s the case, that’s fantastic.”

He said if there are cost-effective solutions the developers can make to prevent potential fires, “then great. That’s what the purpose of this conversation is.”

Mrs. O’Brien said after the meeting that despite the potential for private development near Geauga Lake, the township is steadfast in their vision of ensuring the entire lake becomes accessible to the public. Currently, there is no public access to the lake.

To get there, however, she said, it will take time and there are no guarantees on any of the concept plans presented thus far that residents may look forward to, referencing back to concept art and photos Greg Soltis, senior designer with RDL Architects, presented during last week's Feb. 16 information session on the Geauga Lake property's development.

"We [still] have to figure out cost, access, you know, we're not sure what it looks like," she told the public regarding potential plans around the lake during the information session.

"Recognize as much as we want this to be done tomorrow, it will take time," she added, noting that nothing is set in stone yet. "Some of these [plans], hopefully, will occur, and other things will not occur."

Sam Cottrill

Sam Cottrill started reporting for the Times in February 2019 and covers Auburn, Bainbridge, Bentleyville and Chagrin, Kenston, Solon and West Geauga schools. She graduated from Kent State University in 2018 with a bachelor's degree in journalism.