

Meijer deal reached for Geauga Lake District

By MARTHA SOROHAN

Five years after abandoning plans to build a store at the former Geauga Lake District, Meijer's plans are back on.

News broke on Monday that a deal had been struck, making Meijer, a retailer based in Grand Rapids, Mich., one of several owners of the 600-acre property along with Menards, Vision Apartments, developer Industrial Commercial Properties, and Bainbridge Township.

Frank Guglielmi, Meijer senior director of corporate communications, confirmed the 16-acre \$4.9 million purchase. He said the store will be a standard Meijer "supercenter" of approximately 160,000 square feet. "However, it's still very early in the process and no build date has been set yet," he said. Bainbridge Township trustees couldn't be happier. "We like the 'big box' stores," said Bainbridge Trustees Chair Jeff Markley at Monday's township trustees meeting. "It's going to be regional shopping. Those stores are more successful if there is a collection of them. They've got a rock-solid base, and people will show up." Mr. Markley said he can't wait for it to be finished. "I'd be at Menard's tomorrow if I could," he said.

Earlier that day, he had been the Man of the Hour, commenting on Cleveland television channels after the news of the purchase broke on Crain's, he said. Mr. Markley views the Geauga Lake District development as a win-win for the township. He sounded sympathetic as he talked about the former amusement park property's sale to a developer for just half of its \$15 million appraised value, and the lengthy process of turning a brownfield into marketable property. "Think of all those roller coasters," he said. "It's a mountain of concrete. And they aren't even done with the demolition." The delay in getting the property into marketable condition is what led Meijer to pull out of its first deal there in 2018. "We want to be out there. That was a mandate from the get-go," Mr. Markley said. Bainbridge is getting what it wants from the property: green space, easy access to the lake and some nostalgia thrown in. Lake access will be easier for township residents because the plan calls for a new road that will enable Bainbridge safety forces to reach the area in nine minutes, half the time it takes now. "We may also need to store a ladder truck," Mr. Markley said, speaking of additional responsibilities awaiting township safety forces.

However, so much misinformation is circulating on social media, about the project that Mr. Markley and fellow trustees Kristina O'Brien and Dr. Michael Bates plan to release a White Paper in the coming weeks about the TIF – Tax Increment Financing, an economic development incentive for new construction – and the JEDD, or Joint Economic Development District, that enables rural areas to join forces on large economic development projects. At Monday's meeting, Bainbridge Township trustee candidate Sally DeAngelo's questions regarding TIF and JEDD social media comments regarding the Geauga Lake District plans prompted all three trustees to shake their heads. "We realized during candidates' night that it's a complicated issue. It's not a simple 'sound byte,'" Mr. Markley said. "With Geauga Lake, there are certain public improvements that are eligible under the TIF, and we wanted an active park, playground, a lake loop trail around the Bainbridge property. These are all public improvements."

Contrary to social media posts stating that Bainbridge Township has given \$31 million to the developer, Mr. Markley said that "not one penny" from Bainbridge now, or in the future, is going to the developers until an agreement is signed following a series of public meetings. The funds, he said, are sitting in a TIF fund controlled by the township. Even if the township wanted to give funds to the developer, ICP, such a payment would require an agreement with ICP, and Mr. Markley said there is no agreement. "There is no check for the developer unless there's an agreement," he said. Nor does he foresee the new Meijer opening any time soon. He said that the chain typically opens new stores in the spring, and that even if Meijer were to break ground next summer, the store would not open before 2025 – or 2026. Like everyone else, he said it is facing supply chain issues and inflationary costs of materials. He said that Meijer uses its own materials when constructing new stores. But whenever it comes, Mr. Markley sees it as a boost to Kenston Local Schools, which shares with other districts declining enrollment and state funding. He predicts the school district will come up a winner as a result of the 10-year TIF, adding that the TIF District includes Bainbridge Township, but not Aurora, which also shares a portion of the Geauga Lake District. "The TIF pays for infrastructure improvements so we don't have to go to the taxpayers," said Bainbridge Fiscal Officer Janice Sugarman.