Proposed development of woods sparks debate

By Doug Mell
City government reporter

Two "For Sale" signs, in bold, stark letters, bracket the 3.4 acres along Lake Mendota Drive.

You can drive or walk along the woods, after going past the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Eagle Heights Apartments, and never know of the concern the proposed development of the land has caused.

When you come to The Cove condominiums, the western end of the land, the significance of the woods in the eyes of environmentalists still may not be apparent.

But you only have to read the dozens of letters to city officials, pleading that the city work with the university to buy the land, to realize that the land has become a focal point for those who want to preserve a bit of Madison's past.

The concern has increased recently with the push by the owner of the property, Gerald Welch, 10 N. Charter St., to sell 11½ acres of the land for the construction of a duplex.

Faced with an outcry from those who want to keep the land in a natural state, the city Board of Estimates asked Mayor Joseph Sensenbrenner to study whether the city and the university could buy the land, assessed at more than $400,000.

"I wish I could be more confident," said mayoral assistant David Chandler about the prospects for coming up with the money to buy the land. "I'm hopeful but not confident."

Chandler is among those who abhor the thought of a development in the woods. But Chandler also is painfully aware of the city's financial limitations.

The university may be able to put up $50,000 to $75,000, Chandler said. One private group has promised to provide $1,000 and others may come up with small amounts. But the city would have to shoulder the majority of the cost to purchase the land.

"We just don't have that kind of money sitting around," Chandler said.

"I really do not know," Peterson said when asked about the chances for the city and university being able to work out a purchase.

"But the problem, again, is money. The university offered to buy the land for $79,000, which was rejected."

"We are in a difficult position," Peterson said. "It's only 3.4 acres. We obviously have no interest in developing it." The funds the university has for the land, he said, are "substantially short" of what Welch would want.

To those who know the woods, who hold the trees and vegetation close to their hearts, the land is worth every penny the city would invest in it. Witness a sample of statements in letters to Sensenbrenner and aldermen:

"Sites such as Eagle Heights Woods are very rare and truly improve the quality of life for all the citizens of Madison" — Tom Jeffries, president of the Spring Harbor Neighborhood Association.

"Any attempt at commercial or residential development would have to result in the destruction of the natural environment and lead to erosion so severe that it would be hard to undo. This would deprive future generations of a heritage which should be preserved," — Capital Community Concerns.

"Private development of that shore, especially along the steep slopes north of Eagle Heights Woods, has..."
A bicyclist rides past the Lower Eagle Heights Woods, which are up for sale.

—State Journal photo by A. Craig Benson