

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 1½ 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.

Hurry Peterson, a university official working on the project, isn't much more optimistic.

Meetings set

Three city committees have scheduled debate or action on the ecological value of the Lower Eagle Heights Woods and what course the city of Madison should take to help preserve the land.

The Commission on the Environment will meet at 3:30 p.m. today in Room 201 of the City-County Building.

The Parks Commission will meet at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 10 in Room 224 of the City-County Building.

The Plan Commission will meet at 5:30 p.m. Aug. 15 in Room 201 of the City-County Building.

"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 theirs." — Capital Community Citizens.

"Private development of that shore, especially along the steep slopes north of Eagle Heights Woods, has . . . never been desirable; construction of the existing building there is well-recognized to have been a serious error." Katharine T. Bradley, emeritus director of the UW — Madison Arboretum.

To Welch, who finally gained title to the land about a month ago after a lengthy legal process, the land represents a substantial economic value.

Welch has a buyer for one parcel, the largest one of about 1½ acres on the west end, who wants to build a duplex. He also has "lots of people" inquiring about the other two lots.

But standing in the way is the city Plan Commission. On July 18, the commission delayed action on a conditional use permit needed for the construction of the duplex.

Welch is considering suing the city over the delays.

"I have an offer to purchase," he said. "We have submitted a valid plan to the plan commission. If they tend to delay, causing what I feel is a loss of a buyer, it's all the more ground I have for some type of action."

Legal action is nothing new for that land. The former owner, John Voight, had to sue the city to get the zoning changed from conservancy to residential.

It is unfair to paint Welch as someone intent on destroying the ecological value of the land, he said.

"It would be foolish for me not to be concerned about the integrity of the property," Welch said. "We don't want to destroy the environment."

Welch said he would be happy to discuss the land with city and university officials, "if we get an offer in the next couple of weeks."

Chandler, Sensenbrenner's assistant, said the mayor wants to have a recommendation on what action the city will take on Aug. 15.

Not out of the question is condemnation proceedings, he said. A land-use or tax breaker for Welch, he said, is being considered. Chandler said.



A bicyclist rides past the Lower Eagle Heights Woods, which are up for sale.

—State Journal photo by A. Craig Benson