

# Last minute change-up by Twp. could cost parks BAPC land

Sheila A. Vilvens, [svilvens@communitypress.com](mailto:svilvens@communitypress.com) 3:43 p.m. EST February 4, 2016



(Photo: Sheila Vilvens/The Community Press)

Anderson Township Board of Trustees still plan to buy the Beech Acres Parenting Center property, but plans to convey it back to the Anderson Park District are changing.

In a Jan. 26 letter addressed to Anderson Township Board of Park Commissioners, and posted to the Anderson Township website, Administrator Vicky Earhart writes:

“The Board is committed to working with the Park Commissioners to ensure that ATPD continues to provide indoor recreational opportunities to our community either through the existing RecPlex or a renovated/rebuilt indoor recreation facility. However, the Board does not, and never has intended to lease, sell, donate or otherwise convey all of the Beech Acres Land to ATPD.”

This statement contradicts a public statement made Oct. 1 by former Trustee President Russ Jackson at a joint meeting of the trustees, Forest Hills Board of Education and park commissioners, as well as a letter dated Oct. 8.

During the Oct. 1 meeting, Jackson, on behalf of the trustees, proposed that the township buy the BAPC property through bonds and hold the land until the feasibility of the proposed Anderson 2020 plan was fully vetted. Once the plan was determined as feasible or unfeasible, the schools or parks could then buy the property from the township. This proposal was affirmed in an Oct. 8 letter from Earhart to the park commissioners.

The Anderson 2020 Plan proposed, in part, construction of a new Anderson High School on the Beech Acres Property and a multi-use development located at the current AHS site. In June 2015, the park district entered into an agreement with Beech Acres Parenting Center to buy the nearly 40 acres of land and RecPlex pending passage of a 0.7-mill, 15-year parks levy. Negotiations for the purchase started in the fall of 2014.

Jackson said it's not a contradiction, but a matter of semantics.

“We never voted on anything other than to agree to take over the purchase agreement from the park district,” he said. The only reason the trustees agreed to buy the property was to protect it while the Anderson 2020 Plan was vetted. No commitments were made beyond that.

In order for the township to buy the land, the park district needed to assign its purchase agreement to the township and pull its levy from the ballot. In the interest of allowing further exploration of the Anderson 2020 Plan, the park commissioners voted Oct. 13 to do both.

With the board of education finding in early January that the Anderson 2020 plan was not feasible, the park commissioners expected the terms of the October agreement to be solid and that they would once again be in the position to own the property.

“I believed the township and the trustees would abide by the October 2015 agreement,” Park Commission President Nadine Gelter said. “We did what was requested, formally withdrew the levy and requested the landowner assign the contract to the township. I expected the township would do what they said, buy it and hold it for the vetting process for a new AHS.”

In their own letter to residents dated Jan. 28, Gelter and Wayne Hermann, of the Anderson Foundation for Parks and Recreation and former park commissioner, shared with residents the key events that have occurred over the last few months regarding BAPC property. They also asked residents to “weigh in on the fate of this iconic property in the township’s public input portion of their comprehensive plan update process” and at trustee meetings.

Earhart said in an email to the *Forest Hills Journal* that she cannot share what was discussed in an executive session during joint meetings between the trustees and commissioners.

“However, I can tell you that I have personally informed Ken Kushner (parks executive director) that if the township acquires Beech Acres, the park district will not get all of the land,” she wrote. “The board is interested in ensuring that the park district retains the RecPlex or some type of indoor recreation facility and surrounding acreage, but they don’t envision the entire 36 acres being turned into a park.”

“That conversation occurred on numerous occasions and I trust that Ken relayed that information to his commissioners as he knew I was speaking on behalf of my board.”

With this new direction in place, the BAPC land and Skytop (former site of Bigg's) properties along Beechmont Avenue and Dorn parcels located at Five Mile Road and Kellogg Avenue, are now a focus of a study commissioned by the township to determine the highest and best use for the properties. This study is a piece of the comprehensive plan update which is expected to get underway in March and continue through early fall.

### **Anderson Twp. ends efforts to buy BAPC**

The Anderson Township Board of Trustees is ending efforts to purchase the Beech Acres Parenting Center property.

During the Feb. 4 monthly workshop meeting, the trustees approved a resolution directing Anderson Township Administrator Vicky Earhart to discontinue any further negotiations with Beech Acres and the Anderson Park District with respect to the purchase of the BAPC land.

With this action, the park district now has the option of moving forward with acquiring the property, Earhart said in an email explaining the action.

"The public will be provided with an opportunity to make its voice heard through potential levy proceedings and certainly during the township's comprehensive plan update. An invitation has been extended for the park district to have representation on the comprehensive plan steering team," Earhart said.

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