

Orange County Review

Orange County's newspaper of record since 1931

www.orangenews.com

July 2, 2020

Vol. 89, No. 34 • \$1.00

Proposed PEC land gift creates town council conflict

Property would connect Verling Park with GVFC fairgrounds

BY JEFF POOLE
Editor

What seemed a rather innocuous agenda item sparked an hour-long discussion filled with innuendo and accusations at a recent virtual meeting of the Gordonsville Town Council.

When the council reached, "consideration of resolution of support for park expansion property purchase" on the agenda at its June 15 meeting, council member Jim Bradley didn't hold back.

Council member Liz Samra made a motion to support a resolution for the Piedmont Environmental Council's purchase of a 0.85-acre tract that would connect Verling Park and the Dix Memorial Pool to the Gordonsville Volunteer Fire Company fairgrounds, ultimately creating a contiguous in-town park network of approximately 10 acres.

The PEC already had helped the town secure a privately owned home and tract within the Verling Park block in 2018 and the next year added a nearby parcel on Allen Street that had been considered for high-density housing between the fairgrounds and the pool. The subject parcel is at 304 Market Street and includes a 1950's era ranch-style house, shed with lawn and mature deciduous trees.

"I think we should have a work session on this," Bradley began after Samra made her motion. "This is big and we've never discussed any of this."

The council's agenda packet included an illustration of a proposed rendering of what a park network connecting the properties could look like.

The proposed resolution agenda item only was to support incorporating the parcel into park space for the town—not a conceptual plan, nor a commitment on the town's behalf to do anything really except PEC's efforts to secure the parcel.

PEC field representative Peter Hujik said his organization and the town had been working together to create collective park and open space within the town with the parcels PEC acquired being transferred to the town. The effort was part of the Gordonsville Visions planning charrette conducted by the University of Virginia School of Architecture students and released in 2018.

The new tract, along Market and Piedmont streets, would complete a 10-acre green space in town, including the pool, picnic shelter, trails and more.

The resolution on the agenda was to support the concept of including the new parcel into park space in town.

But Bradley wasn't convinced. Instead, he questioned everything from the purpose of the charrette to the design schematic included in the council packet and PEC's control of the property through conservation easements.

"This is not a formal design," Hujik noted. "We put it together to help our board and the town council envision what it could look like and included some ideas of what we knew there was support for—including additional parking for the pool, a regulation-sized pool and tennis court. The things here are just an idea of how it could work."

"We can still design this how we want as long as we get the space," Mayor Bob Coiner offered.

"We envisioned a broader community planning effort with the town council, the fire company, the Little League and community members to see who this all could work," Hujik added.

Bradley, unmoved, referred Hujik individually back to the Gordonsville Visions planning exercise conducted

by the UVa students.

"Tell me what you think that was," he asked directly.

"It was a planning charrette by the UVa School of Architecture to develop a concept and vision for the town," Hujik answered.

"That is completely and totally wrong," Bradley countered. "It was a project for their class. They were getting graded on it. You and Liz [Samra] sat over there and told them where you wanted parks. It was not in any way asked for the by the Town of Gordonsville. I've told you that in other meetings, but you continue to push this."

"We have to focus on what's important," Coiner interjected. "The origin of this may be important to some, but not to others. To me, whatever the origin is, we've walked that property and talked about it at work sessions."

He said the subject property "works for me," citing its size, old-growth trees and open space. "It looks like the piedmont. It flows. It feels like nature."

He said other properties in the neighborhood wouldn't have worked as well, but the location and the availability of the Allen Street parcel and the subject Market Street parcel created a good fit.

"There's elegance in this plan, no matter the impetus," he continued. "I think Gordonsville will be held up as innovative for someone else's efforts and ability to raise the funds to purchase this. This would be a real feather in our cap that would enhance our green space and quality of life."

"I think the plan looks good," Bradley conceded, noting he was more concerned with what wasn't included in the proposed resolution of approval.

"Gordonsville ends up getting the land and paying for the design and PEC puts easements on it and we don't know what happens until after we accept it," Bradley said. "All that should happen before we accept it."

"I know with accepting a donation of land, there is a lot to consider," Hujik said. "At this point, we are looking at the concept of adopting this additional parcel into park space. The PEC would raise the money for concept-level planning. We would help shape the easement and get insight from the town before we ultimately transfer the property."

He suggested that process could take 18 to 24 months.

"Why is council kept in the dark on this?" Bradley said. "We didn't plan on spending money on this and now with this concept we're going to have to spend money on it, plus, you'll have control of it with your easements. Why aren't easements discussed before we approve it?"

Hujik said PEC didn't want to present something to the council before it had funding to purchase the property lined up and a reasonable chance it could secure the property.

"Why wasn't council involved?" Bradley continued.

"We've kept you up to date," Hujik responded. "We showed you the property last summer with our board and our donors. It's hard to bring something to council without the property under contract."

"You're doing this so you can get another easement under your belt," Bradley said.

Hujik said the Virginia Outdoors Foundation likely would hold the easement.

"You know that doesn't make any difference," Bradley countered.

"As I understand it, this easement, which is not yet finalized, ensures this



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY PEC

Pictured is a conceptual plan showing what a 10-acre contiguous park area could look like if the Piedmont Environmental Council acquires parcel 3 between Verling Park (parcel 4), the Allen Street parcel it already acquired (parcel 2) and the Gordonsville Volunteer Fire Company fairgrounds (parcel 1)

is a park that will serve the town for decades to come and provide recreation for all is a gift to the town," Samra said. "This conversation makes it sound like the town is making an acquisition when it's accepting a gift."

In an effort to make his case, Bradley cited a situation in northern Virginia where an easement on a property that had been gifted later prevented someone from selling vegetables grown on that same piece of property. He feared accepting this tract would come with similar restrictions.

"There are different kinds of easements," Hujik stated.

"Why can't you tell us now what the easements will say?" Bradley challenged.

Hujik noted he'd met with the council members last summer about the possibility of acquiring the tract as part of a town park network.

"Who?" Bradley questioned, before nearly all the council members on the virtual meeting responded, "Everybody."

"Oh, that meeting at the park?" Bradley asked. "That was a farce."

"Right now, we have no control of the property, it's not available to the town and it's not a park," Samra said. "It's a private piece of property that's being given to the town as a gift. You have no control over it now."

Bradley said if the parcel is "a gift, free and clear," he had no problem with accepting it, but said it was "a gift with strings attached."

"Most public funding for park development has requirements," Hujik noted.

"There has to be constraints on it," Coiner added. "There are private individuals giving a lot of money who want it to be a park. What if you gave \$100,000 to it and once it was turned over they changed the whole zoning?" he asked rhetorically. "Since we're getting this as a gift, the people paying for it have to have some assurances it'll be a green space, whether it's a pool, a tennis court, walking trail. That's what excited them to donate. Why give it to us and let us do something else with it?"

"Does the easement say it has to be used as a park or a whole bunch of other things?" Bradley asked.

"It's a public access easement," Hujik responded. "So it would have to be public access controlled by the town. It would limit it to park use. It couldn't be a subdivision and the amount of build-

ing on-site would be limited."

Bradley asked if commercial activity would be permitted.

"I believe so, in terms of a community fair or something," Hujik responded.

Coiner said if he wasn't happy with the proposed agreement, he wouldn't sign it. "I've worked with PEC and I don't think they're trying to hoodwink us."

"I think the essence of this is not a surprise, it's expected," he continued. "If we want to think about hypotheticals, sure, anything could hypothetically end up awful. But we're all working together and they want it to work as much as we do. To put something silly down doesn't make sense for either side. The incentive is for us to be happy, them to be happy and this to be a celebrated project."

The mayor acknowledged the town could not acquire these additional parcels on its own and appreciated PEC's efforts to help the town.

"The proof is in the pudding, but I think what's going to happen is what you want to happen," he said generally, but in Bradley's direction.

"We want to give it to you," Hujik added. "I'm sure we'll come to a reasonable agreement."

"There are flat-out lies in this memorandum and that's what riles me," Bradley said. "The concept is good. I like parks."

"When people give something, they have to get a little something back," the mayor said, "but we're not going to just roll over and get a terrible project. This will be a reason to come to Gordonsville. Peter is a man of high integrity and I appreciate all he's done."

"I don't," Bradley quipped.

Breaking the tension, council member Ron Brooks chimed in and noted that the purpose of the agenda item was not a resolution binding the town to any particular action but simply support for PEC acquiring the property as part of a town park network.

"It's a resolution of support," he noted. "There will be other conversations about the details."

"In the final agreement, the town will be involved, but they'll have to have some things because of the money that's been given to them to make this happen," Coiner concluded. "I'm excited about this."

Ultimately, the council voted 4-1 in favor of the resolution of support, with Bradley dissenting.