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Gordonsville defers plans on Verling Park expansion

Citing finances, delays issuing RFP

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Reporter

The Gordonsville Town Council opened its Feb. 10 work session, to address the Verling Park project, with a statement of cautious optimism from Mayor Bob Coiner. It ended the night with a 3-2 vote to defer the matter until its March meeting.

On the Zoom call, Coiner explained that although the councilmembers had not voted to continue the park project at that time, they had scheduled a work session to hammer out details on designing a new pool, park layout, picking a contractor and raising funds.

“My guess is there will be consensus to move forward,” Coiner said. “I don’t know if there’s any funding right now to put up, but we can always give our time. Because our world is Gordonsville.”

Coiner said that the project is likely the largest and most expensive in Gordonsville’s history. He believes that the concept for the park and pool are sound and that the other councilmembers are on the same page about what they want to accomplish. According to Coiner the town has already spent \$131,000 on Verling Park in the last few years. That money was used to extend the property of the park to the full block and also buy more land from CSX in order to have room to add a new swimming pool.

The Verling Park project is a piece that fits into a bigger puzzle, one that the town is putting together with the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC). A local citizens group known as Town to Trail has partnered with PEC in recent years to purchase parcels around Verling Park and connect them to form a larger, more extensive park system in the middle of Gordonsville.

Town to Trail also advises town property owners on adding nature trails to their own land.

According to a post on PEC’s website, last year the nonprofit and Town to Trail purchased a parcel along Market Street in town that will help connect Verling Park to the fairgrounds behind Gordonsville Volunteer Fire Company. The firehouse sits two blocks north on Baker Street. Eventually, PEC and Town to Trail hope to sell their holdings to the town for future stewardship.

Once Coiner finished his opening remarks, he turned the floor over to Vice Mayor Emily Winkey. She said that there has been significant interest from Gordonsville residents in the town improving and expanding Verling Park since 2017. Winkey also praised PEC for its efforts.

The meeting turned to the question of whether it was the right time for town manager Debbie Kendall to issue a request for proposals (RFP) seeking conceptual plans for the project.

Both Coiner and councilmember Liz Samra expressed support for creating an RFP as soon as possible. Councilmember Jim Bradley agreed with them, although he advised the council to be careful when deciding what design firm to ultimately choose for the project.

When it was Councilmember Ron Brooks’ turn to speak, he said he was for the project overall, but is concerned about how the town will pay for it. He pointed out that the town is still paying for other developments such as the Main Street renovations and the freight depot rehab. Brooks said with COVID-19 still in the pandemic stage and severe economic uncertainty affecting the entire country, he felt an RFP was premature.

Responding to Brooks, Coiner countered that sometimes local governments have to move quickly to keep from losing a promising opportunity and cited the

town’s acquisition of the aforementioned CSX property. He said that if the town hadn’t jumped on the chance to buy the land then they may have never been able to purchase it.

Brooks said he would be much more comfortable with moving ahead and creating an RFP if a comprehensive fundraising plan was made first.

Peter Hujik, PEC’s field representative for Culpeper, Madison and Orange counties, was also on the call and spoke briefly about his organization’s involvement. He said that a significant number of citizens in the community had shown interest in the park project and he believes that raising enough money for the RFP is possible. According to Hujik, the town along with PEC, could potentially receive federal funding in the future if the money becomes available.

After a few more minutes of discussion, Coiner called for a straw poll to see who on the council actually supported putting the RFP process on the agenda for the February meeting. Winkey and Samra voted to move forward. Bradley reconsidered his position once he heard from Brooks and decided to vote no. When the vote got to Brooks he made his case once again.

“Please don’t hear me say, ‘I’m not for the project.’” Brooks said. “I’m absolutely for the project. I’m not for the timing of putting it on the agenda and how we are going to pay for it. Yes, I hear there is a lot of support for it and I completely agree with that and I will contribute to it personally, but I really don’t think the town is in a place right now to pay a dollar for it.”

Coiner said he wanted to keep the council united in their approval of the park project, so he chose to vote no and try to move further discussion of the RFP to the March meeting.

With that the work session ended and the council agreed to reconvene for their regular meeting on Feb. 22 at 6 p.m.