

## **Open Work Session**

### **West Metro Core Program Open Space (POS) Conversion to Connelly Mill Property**

**April 20, 2021**

Mr. Steve Miller, Director of Recreation, Parks and Tourism, and Ms. Katie Rouse, Deputy Director, came before Council. Mr. Miller said he is here to talk about a proposed Program Open Space land conversion from the West Metro Core property to the Connelly Mill Property. He said, as Council may know, the West Metro Core property was purchased in 2009 by the County using State Program Open Space funds. He said this was before his time with the County, but he believes the thought process was that development was going to continue towards the West Metro Core part of the County and this property was intended at one time to be built into a sports complex in order to meet that demand. He said, fast forwarding twelve years later, that development did not materialize to what was anticipated, and plans for the park did not materialize as well, so for the last 12 years the property has been leased to a local farmer, which really is not the intent of Program Open Space as far as the Program itself.

Mr. Miller explained, they are here to propose moving the Program Open Space restriction from the West Metro Core property over to Connelly Mill, so a portion of the Connelly Mill property would then have that restriction to be used for Program Open Space and development. He said they feel like this is a much more beneficial opportunity for the residents and citizens of the County. He said a conversion process is not an easy process, so this process started over a year ago and has been through all the State agencies, and now has been approved and signed off by the three Secretaries of the State, so they are here to seek Council approval for this conversion and he is happy to answer any questions.

Mr. Holloway said back in 2008 they investigated buying property for a park on the westside, and there were a lot of people in favor of having this park, but it never materialized, and he does not know why. He said then asked if they will have a Public Hearing on this before anything is done, to which Mrs. Hurley responded, a Resolution would need to come before Council to approve the conversion, and if they want to surplus the property or dispose of it in some manner, at that point they would want to have a Public Hearing. Mr. Holloway asked if they would have a Public Hearing to do the conversion, to which Mrs. Hurley responded, she is not aware of a legal requirement for a Public Hearing to do that. Mr. Holloway said there may not be the appetite over there now that there was then, but at that time there were a lot of folks who wanted a park, and they know that area is still growing, though it is not growing as fast as it was. He said he understands Mr. Miller's purpose, and the correspondence he sent Council says he wants to sell that property at some point in time as surplus property, but he thinks the people on the westside need to have a voice in what happens because they certainly had a voice when it was purchased, so he thinks that is where they need to head with this before they do anything else.

Mr. Dodd said Mr. Holloway brings up some good points.

Mrs. Acle said she remembers when this property was purchased and everyone in her development signed petitions to develop the park. She then asked what happened because there is really not much out there as far as sports complexes or ballfields or anything like that for Mardela and the westside, to which Mr. Miller responded, this was before his time with the County, but his understanding is that the thought process was that developments would move there at a faster rate than what they have. He said he has been in this position since 2015 and has not heard those concerns from the residents in that part of the County. He said they had a Public Hearing before this process started before it went to the State,

and the Public Hearing was advertised, and there was no opposition presented at that meeting. He clarified, he is not opposed to further public discussion on the topic, but he has not been made aware by anybody or heard of a public demand to develop this, and it has been farmed for the last 12 years. He said, if there is an appetite for a park there, they have to look at paying for that as well and how to go about doing that. He said there has been a public process, and he is certainly open to continuing that.

Mr. Holloway said, when that property was purchased, someone was selling a piece of property down the road and this property was about half the price of the other property and it was considered a great deal. He said he thinks Mr. Cannon and Mr. McCain were on the Council then, and, by today's standards, they got that property at a really good deal, so do they want to give it up? He said building is going to increase and there will be more people in the future. He said he knows it was not intended for leasing, but he thinks the public ought to have input into this. He then asked when this public meeting was and where it was held, to which Mr. Miller responded, it was at the Civic Center and it was announced and open to the public. Mr. Holloway asked if it was for just this purpose, to which Mr. Miller responded, yes. Mr. Dodd said he wonders if the public really found out about the meeting, to which Mr. Miller responded, it was posted through the usual channels as far as posting meetings.

Mr. Miller said, as far as the future of the property and whether or not to surplus it, that is probably for a future discussion, and he would consult with the County Executive whenever that time comes, and then the Executive would propose surplus properties if there are others out there. He clarified, this may or may not be included in that list, and he noted this as a possibility, but moving the conversion does not commit them to keeping or selling the property and the County could still hold onto it. He clarified, the conversion would move the POS restriction from one to the other, and that is really what they are here to do now, and he thinks the future of the West Metro property is for a future discussion.

Mr. Holloway asked if this would impede anything happening on that property in the future as far as funding since it was bought under POS money, to which Mr. Miller responded, no. He explained, if it is County-owned, they can still apply for development funds and still do what they want with it, so it does not restrict that in any way. He said this would put the restriction on the Connelly Mill property where they would be committing that to public recreation and access, which he thinks is a huge opportunity with its location and natural features, so that is where the commitment would be at this point.

Mr. Holloway asked if any funds would transfer with this, to which Mr. Miller responded, over the last 12 years, similar to what they did with Pirate's Wharf, they collected the farm leases and there is approximately \$300,000 in the fund balance from the farm lease money from the last 12 years. He said, if they decide to surplus it, they have that money in hand that they could use to develop Connelly Mill or leverage it for grants, or use it to develop West Metro if they wanted to, but they have about \$300,000 currently from the farm lease. Mr. Holloway asked if there is any additional money from POS going to Connelly Mill if they transfer this property, to which Mr. Miller responded, at this moment, no, but they can apply for it, as every year they get an allocation from the State with POS. He explained, the challenge there is they have a five-year outlook for POS, and that is a lifeline for them to be able to do capital projects. He said it is a finite amount of money, and they programmed it out for the next five years, and it is a challenge. He said they try to share that with municipalities and they have a process they go through, which he thinks is a good process, but the needs are always greater than the funds, so there is an opportunity to apply for more, but that would kick another project down the road further.

Mr. McCain said they have a five-year masterplan, and the West Metro Core is not in that masterplan for any development, to which Mr. Miller responded, that is correct.

Mrs. Acle asked if it was in the masterplan previously, to which Mr. Miller responded, a long time ago. He said he thinks it was in their 2005 or 2007 LPPRP, which is a five-year Recreation and Parks Plan, but to his knowledge it was not in the last two versions as far as developing it, so they do not have specific plans at this time.

Mr. Cannon asked what percentage of the funding for the West Metro Core was from POS, to which Mr. Miller responded, he believes all of it. He said he believes it was about a million dollar purchase, and it was all POS. Mr. Cannon said he is assuming the map shows the section that is going to become POS property at Connelly Mill, to which Mr. Miller responded, if that is approved, the yellow area on the map would be the restricted Open Space. He said they excluded the two borrow pits that Public Works is digging now, and he thinks that could become part of a future park, but they excluded that from the restriction to allow them the freedom to use that as they are using it now. Mr. Cannon said he assumes the State has said that it is the equivalent of the West Metro property, to which Mr. Miller responded, yes. He explained, to qualify for a conversion, there are three qualifications – it has to be equal or greater acreage, equal or greater appraisal value, and then equal or greater recreational value, so the State signed off that this qualifies on all three. Mr. Cannon said it is great to have this as an option, but the only reason the County really took this property was because they were convinced that the value of the property was for the borrow pits for the landfill, and it looks like they are taking about 85 percent of that away. He then asked how they are going to follow through with that commitment and the savings for the landfill, to which Mr. Miller responded, looking at the map, it does not touch those pits, so those would be unaffected. Mr. Cannon clarified, not the current pits, but he was under the impression that the whole property was being looked at as a land use for soil. Mr. Dodd said that is what he thought. Mr. Cannon said, if Mr. Miller is saying that the section cordoned off will be sufficient for the next 10 or 20 years, then that is what the initial goal was, but he was under the impression that the entire property needed to be used to accomplish that goal. Mr. Miller said he is probably not the right person to answer that, as that would be Public Works.

Mr. Holloway said, when the Council was trying to be convinced to acquire the property, that was the excuse given. He clarified, the Council was told that they would be digging dirt from there 100 years from now. Mr. Cannon added, Mr. Weston Young came up with some very good charts in reference to that and good data as far as what the cost benefit would be in the long run.

Mr. Cannon said he respects what Mr. Miller is trying to do, but at the time it was not felt that this property could be assimilated to the current Henry Parker complex. He clarified, he does not remember why, but Mr. Miller is saying he thinks it can easily be connected and beneficial, to which Mr. Miller responded, it would be a challenge to physically connect it, but that would be ideal. He said there is a ravine and there is a drop off in elevation, so they would have to bridge that if they were going to physically connect them. He said, in a worst case scenario, if they could not do that in a safe or affordable way, it is around the block, so the proximity is there, but, ideally, allowing the connectivity would be the best case scenario. Mr. Cannon said at least Mr. Miller has set this up so Council knows they have an option, which is great, but he still thinks it would be best to go back to Public Works and ask what their take is on this, and whether the best benefit to the County would be for the borrow pit, or for Recreation and Parks. He clarified, at least Mr. Miller is getting there so Council has a choice.

Mr. Hastings said, at the General Assembly it looks like there is going to be an extra \$85 million going to local parks. He clarified, he does not know how the County can take advantage of that, and they are still trying to figure that out, but, as much as possible, they need to be ready to take advantage of that for what could be helpful for their parks.

Mr. Dodd said they can discuss this at a later date. Mr. Cannon suggested having Public Works attend a meeting with Mr. Miller to discuss this further. Mr. Holloway suggested having a Public Hearing, to which Mr. Cannon responded, a Public Hearing would be great, but they do not need that if they are not going to do this. He said he thinks it would be nice to have Public Works here with Recreation and Parks to look at what the best benefit is for the County. Mr. Dodd then asked if Mr. Cannon is recommending another Work Session, to which Mr. Cannon responded, yes. Mr. Hastings said it would be good to get clarity on the borrow pit. Mr. Holloway suggested, in the meantime, the Councilmember whose District this is in maybe can share some insight about what some of the constituents feel. Mrs. Acle said she remembers signing the petition to get it several years ago. Mr. Dodd said they will set up another Work Session. There was no further discussion.



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Larry W. Dodd, President, District 3

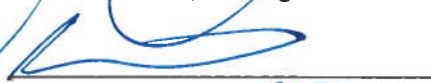
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Joe Holloway, Vice President, District 5



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John T. Cannon, At-Large



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William R. McCain, At-Large



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Ernest F. Davis, District 1



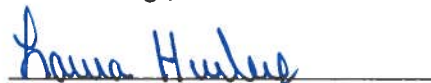
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Nicole Acle, District 2



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Josh Hastings, District 4



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Laura Hurley, Council Administrator