

County Council vote before land auction stops county's attempt to buy property

Written by Marty Randall
Wednesday, 04 September 2013 07:42 -

By MARTY RANDALL

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Any attempt that county officials tried to take to cobble together monies to buy property ideally located for a new industrial park south of Scottsburg were quickly quashed Thursday night, August 29.

Different opinions between officials were traded during a special executive session set up that evening for Scott County Commissioners, County Councilmen and members of the recently-revived Scott County Redevelopment Commission (SCRC). In fact, the discussion of how to draw what monies from what fund apparently became so involved during that closed door meeting that the executive session lasted until nearly 6 p.m. A public meeting, during which each group was to vote, and approve, the financial package, was scheduled for 5:30 p.m. The open door meeting did not take place until 6 p.m., and the financial package crafted quickly fell apart.

The haste with which county officials had to act was needed: the property Commissioners wanted to buy came up for auction at 6:30 p.m. that same evening.

There is a total of 150 acres in the bulky, L-shaped parcel. Part of the property is bordered by Lovers Lane and the rest by South Main Street. All are presently in the county. The auction of the property was scheduled by the owner a few months ago, and signs were placed advertising the parcel.

The county wasn't the only entity interested in the land; the City of Scottsburg has also eyed it, and rumors flew that the city was willing to bid up to \$10,000 per acre.

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That rumor apparently fueled further county interest in obtaining the ground for future development. It was a no-brainer as far as Commissioners were concerned. If the county got the property, the land would remain under its control and its SCRC would benefit from TIF (Tax Increment Financing) monies arising from industrial and/or business firms that locate on the

ground. The executive session and public meeting were scheduled and announced by the County Auditor's Office on Friday, August 23.

Consequently, during the public portion of the meeting Wednesday night, Commissioner Mark Hays made a motion that the county buy the 150 acres for no more than \$12,000 per acre at the auction, a total of \$1.8 million. A portion of the funds to make the purchase would be paid by the SCRC, with the rest coming from the money realized by the county from the 2012 sale of Scott Memorial Hospital.

Commissioner Larry Blevins seconded the motion, and all three officials voted for it. Commissioner Bob Tobias was scheduled to represent the county at the auction.

After their brief meeting was adjourned, the County Council went into session. Councilman Clara Adkins advised the remaining five Councilmen present that she was going to abstain from voting on any motion to fund the purchase. That left Council President Eric Gillespie and Councilmen Kelley Robbins, Ab Watts, Iva Gasaway and Donnie Richie available for the vote. Richie made the motion that the Council accept the Commissioners' finance package and proposal to purchase. Under

the package, he noted the first \$700,000 would come from the SCRC's coffers. The remainder would be covered by the hospital money. Because there are seven Councilmen, the vote needed to be at least 4-1 in favor of this plan. Both Gillespie and Watts voted against it, and the effort failed.

Commissioner Tobias was visibly upset by the rejection. "I'd like to make my statement a part of the official record. What happened here tonight does not serve the county well," he commented. Later, he explained that he felt that the county missed an opportunity. "...to be good stewards of

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the money realized by the hospital sale.

In my opinion, this would have been a good investment and a good stewardship of the money because it would have earned us money over the long run." He quickly left as the group of officials began to break up.

At the 6:30 p.m. auction, neither the county nor Scottsburg was represented, though Tobias did attend. The property had, also attracted a number of local farmers, but the winning bid was placed by David Church, a local developer, for \$5,700 per acre.

Church now intends to sell the property to the City of Scottsburg for that same price per acre, advised Scottsburg Mayor Bill Graham. Graham came to the auction site after the auction was completed and approached Church. He told him the city wanted the property.

"He was more than willing to sell it to us. It made me so happy, I actually cried," Mayor Graham related later. The Mayor said the site will eventually become the third TIF District within Scottsburg, offering good acreage for future industrial development.

"I am just so pleased that we will have the opportunity to expand what we envision will some day become another area within our city that will offer jobs to area residents," Mayor Graham stated.