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Anti-zoning group helps in nixing of Whitman bid

Board's rejection follows residents' comments

BY CARL RYAN
BLADE STAFF WRITER

TEMPERANCE -- The Bedford Township Board's 6-1 rejection last week of Jon Whitman's request to rezone approximately 20 acres at 7555 Lewis Ave. followed a succession of township residents' comments against the rezoning.

The residents said they feared the change to C-3 from C-2 for the former site of Mr. Whitman's family's Ford dealership would result in a big-box store such as Walmart being located on the property, which is on the northwest corner of Sterns Road and Lewis.

The first person to speak at the public hearing before last week's vote was Steven Lennex, Mr. Whitman's real estate broker, who described his client's wish as "a benign request" because there was little difference between the zoning designations.

He urged the board to grant the change, saying the new zoning classification would have no effect on public safety or the value of neighboring properties.

Doug Bermick, who is active in the anti-rezoning group Bedford Watch, told the board that a big-box store would be in conflict with the township's master plan for development.

"Large big-box stores should not be allowed next to large residential areas," he said.

Vivian Garber said she believed a big-box store at the site would increase crime and damage the township's already deteriorated roads.

Trustees Gail Hauser-Hurley, James Goebel, and Larry O'Dell voted to deny the change. Joining them were Supervisor Walt Wilburn, Clerk Bob Schockman, and Treasurer Sherri Meyer. Trustee Paul Francis cast the only vote in favor of the request.

The possibility of changing the property's zoning to allow a more intense commercial use has been a township issue for years.

The Monroe County Planning Commission recommended that the request be granted, but its staff wanted it rejected. The township planning commission recommended that the request be turned down. The final decision was up to the township board.

In 2008, the board approved a request by Mr. Whitman to rezone 34 acres from residential to commercial use.

The rezoning was stymied, however, by Bedford Watch's putting the matter on the ballot; voters overturned the decision. Mr. Whitman sued, and Monroe County Circuit Judge Joseph Costello ruled that eight of the acres could be put to commercial use.

In introducing the resolution to deny the request, Mr. O'Dell said a C-3 classification would be inconsistent with the master plan and that with Judge Costello's ruling in hand, Mr. Whitman did not need to rezone the entire acreage.

Mr. Francis said he couldn't see any difference between C-2 and C-3 and that a C-3 classification would "mirror" property across Lewis. He said he believed the impact on surrounding properties would be minor.

Mr. O'Dell said the master plan called for a broader transition area between commercial and residential properties than would exist if the zoning change were granted.

Noted Mr. Wilburn: "This is no easy task. There are no good guys or bad guys."

Mr. Lennex said he didn't know what his client's next move would be.

In other business, the board adopted a 2011-2012 general fund budget of \$3,739,850.

Contact Carl Ryan at: carlryan@theblade.com or 419-724-6050.