

Whitmire property: Civic or commercial development?

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The Town of Franklin originally purchased the 12.71 acre parcel of land known as the Whitmire property to develop new facilities for the town hall, public works or other uses. But over the following years the town board decided on a different course, choosing instead to renovate the Burrell Building on Main Street as the new Town Hall and locating the other facilities elsewhere – leaving the question of what to do with the Whitmire Property.

After prolonged discussion the town leaders decided the expense necessitated putting it to use, and recently solicited proposals from design firms.

“I think the property is much too valuable and the location is such that we would be better served by having a say in how it’s developed,” said Mayor Joe Collins, who did profess that with the current condition of the real estate market, now is not the best time to expect a return on an investment. “In this slow time it’s perfect to go ahead and get your ideas together.”

On June 21, Town Planner Michael Grubermann presented the board with two proposals that had been submitted, after which the board decided to invite the design professionals themselves to come share their ideas with the board.

At the July 19 meeting of the Franklin Town Aldermen, two architects offered their development ideas for the parcel located on the Highlands Road. Throughout last week’s meeting, both design professionals at the behest of Grubermann, proposed their visions of the property while remaining open-minded on what they could make happen in collaboration with board and community members alike.

Edwin Terrel Meek Architect

Terry Meek, of Asheville-based firm Edwin Terrel Meek Architect, was the first to present his approach of how he would design concepts for the town-owned property. Meek has more than 35 years experience in architecture.



A project sketch by Asheville-based architect Terry Meek shows the development Andrews, NC will be receiving from his services.

“I went into practice in 1974 and have had a pretty successful career during that time,” said Meek, adding that most of his work has been community revitalization, hospitality, arts and cultural development.

Meek’s plans focus on identifying appropriate usage of the Whitmire property. If Franklin were to utilize Meek’s services, he projected his work would last for a period of six to eight weeks in designing development concepts.

Franklin Mayor Joe Collins asked Meek to describe what Franklin would see in two months of planning for the property. Meek said that he and his firm would meet with town officials and perhaps adjacent landowners and set up a schedule for planning. Meek said he would then do his homework on the area.

“I am going to be retrieving a lot of information,” he said. Physical data such as current adjacent land uses, previously prepared studies of the area and traffic flow around the site would all be compiled before any planning focus materialized. “We will look at all these different things, and actually filter them to come up with some ideas,” said Meek.

Upon reviewing the findings and recommendations of studies of the property by the town, Meek asserted a plan could then begin to come together. “We don’t need to reinvent the wheel with this project,” he said. “It needs to tie-in with what you have already adopted.”

After assessing all findings, Meek would then develop rough sketches and diagrams reflecting the various recommendations of the studies, compare those diagrams with the current topography of the property and ultimately develop some initial landuse plans sensitive to the town’s development aspirations.

“At what point would there be input from the citizenry and board and other interested folks?” asked Collins.

“As soon as we develop a strategy for putting the thing together, we will then ask ‘who wants to be involved?’” replied Meek, asserting that the book is open as to what the town wants to do,



The Whitmire Property located in east Franklin sits vacant and undeveloped.

suggesting a charrette. Meek added that coming up with an actual concept can take some time, especially after collaborating with all parties involved.

Collins asked Meek what excited him about the project. Meek stated that the Whitmire property is a “significant parcel of land.” Meek also cited the property’s close proximity with the Little Tennessee and downtown Franklin. “The significance of this is what it can really be, and generate in terms of excitement,” he said. “You set the bar for future growth, so-to-speak, and that really excites me to be a part of something like that.”

In the event that the town decided to sell the Whitmire property, Meek stated that he was mindful of the need to have a return on property investment. Meek said that he has been to the property twice now, once with Town Planner Michael Grubermann, but he wants to avoid having any preconceptions of what could happen with the property. “If you do that, you fail to see other opportunities and possibilities.”

Meek said that there were certain “deliverables” upon completion of his service. Drawings, plans, a brochure, opinions and a physical model of the property development were some of the things Meek indicated his services would ultimately offer. Meek’s services would cost the town a single lump sum of \$26,500. Meek said that he could begin work “immediately.”

Allison Ramsey Architects Incorporated

Bill Allison, of Asheville-based Allison Ramsey Architects Incorporated then gave a presentation of the services his firm could offer. Allison explained that his firm is dedicated to “new urbanism,” which employs development practices designed to present cities alternatives to urban sprawl. “We believe in smart growth, we believe in pedestrian-friendly design,” he said.

“We’re big believers in conservation,” Allison continued, explaining that his firm designs many “green” projects. Allison said that his projects should reflect the history and culture of the region. Moreover Allison explained that he and his firm design developments that are consistent with their areas. “If we are going to build houses in Franklin, they are going to look like they belong in Franklin,” said Allison.

Allison proposed providing a form-based code for the Whitmire property that would establish how the site should look, yet not necessarily what should be built there.

“It’s basically a new type of zoning where instead of separation of property by use, it’s separation of property by form - thus form based code,” explained Ramsey. “Basically what we’re saying is that you can do anything you want, you just have to do it our way,” he bemused of the concept.

The practice of form-based code according to Allison was part of the “smart growth” movement, which is environmentally- sensitive land development that minimizes automobile traffic and increases efficiency in property investment.

Allison’s proposal explained that before any collaboration between the firm and town officials or residents began, a period of data collection would take place by the firm. Allison said he would examine boundary and aerial surveys, oil and topographical information as well as study the landscape and adjoining properties among other things.

The second phase according to Allison would be the charrette stage, in which his firm, the town and any other party would give input for collaboration’s sake. During this time the firm would visit the site, establish project goals, explore concepts for a plan, discuss building codes, envision building types for the plan and draft and refine a master plan.

The impact of form-based development as Allison explained would yield higher density neighborhoods that promote foot traffic to nearby commerce. Distance between developments would be another end-result of such development. Green space is generally an intermediate theme in design, according to Allison.

Allison said that upon completion of the charrette, the town would have an illustrative master plan, charrette vision book, code and guidelines for site development and established formbased codes for the property. Ramsey projected this planning would take four days of work with his firm. The cost for the charrette, design and documentation would cost \$24,800, with an additional fee of \$8,000 for developing form-based code.

Town officials input

“My position is, we’ve got it as paid for and it has multiple uses for the town,” said Alderman Bob Scott of the Whitmire property, who feels there is no urgent need for its development. Scott said that developing the property for commercial use would be an economic disadvantage to the town. “Parks and green space are very important to towns like this, the way things are right now. We’ve got enough parking lots, we’ve got enough big box stores,” he said.

Scott added that one of the things that offer drawing power to Franklin is the green space. “If we sold the Whitmire property now, say for a million dollars, five years from now if we need a park or a civic center, where are we going to find 13 acres for a million dollars?” he proposed. “The very things that used to make Franklin so attractive are changing,” he said, citing low traffic congestion and green space as its regional appeal.



An aerial view of east Franklin shows the Whitmire parcel (A) and adjacent lots (B and C). The town-owned Whitmire property is vacant and near commercial areas of interest. Town leaders are unsure of how to deal with the property but have shown interest in purchasing parcels B and C.

“What I think we need to be doing right now is making sure that the businesses we already have are viable and survivable,” said Scott. “If we are going to grow, what we need to do now is make sure that we can maintain the charm of Franklin.”

Collins said that he is not opposed to coming up with options for the town's use of the Whitmire property, and feels that getting ideas for the property's development would not be detrimental to Franklin. Collins feels that town involvement in how the property appears is in order, and that green space would certainly be among the factors to consider. Collins added that he is not in favor of the property being entirely green space.

Collins feels that there is an economic advantage in developing the property by possibly addressing such things as housing, commerce, realignment of roadways among other issues. “We're best serving the town as their stewards by doing a little research to see how we can turn that piece of empty land into a cornerstone, to be an anchor for that east Franklin area.”

“I think we really don't know at this point,” said Joyce Handley of the board's interest in what type of development should occur. Handley agrees with Scott that green space is important, but is not intent on any particular form of development. “It's just a shame for it [the Whitmire property] to just be sitting there.”

Handley asserted that the board is currently considering its options on what to do with the town-owned property. Given the property's contiguous location to the town and future retail projects, Handley is equally interested in commercial possibilities. “It's in a good location by what Lupoli is doing with the East Franklin Shopping Center ... I think we ought to assign something that would coordinate well with it.”

There is no urgent need to begin development according to Handley. “It's a very expensive piece of land, and it's not something that we need to just jump into,” she said.

Town Manager Sam Greenwood explained that because the needs of a town hall complex being met elsewhere in Franklin, the Whitmire property is now considered surplus by the board.

“The debate now amongst the board members is whether or not to use it for something for town purposes or to just simply sell it or to sell the property in conjunction with some East Franklin Corridor-type development plan,” Greenwood explained.

“There is no real rush to it right now because the market is so slow,” said Greenwood of the board taking action with the property.

Greenwood said that development of the property could have a positive economic impact on Franklin. “I think it's an active growth area,” he said, pointing out that the Whitmire property was surrounded by commercial endeavors like the East Franklin Shopping Center and underdeveloped areas like the old Lowe's building.

“It's a good time to look at things, if you're going to look at them.”

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