

Land annexed for housing development south of Roberts Road, Hilliard

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Plans for the construction of more than 1,000 single-family residences and apartments on the east side of Alton Darby Creek Road, south of Roberts Road, moved forward Jan. 28 when Columbus City Council approved annexation of the 369 acres on which they will be built.

Christopher Lohr, a planning manager for Columbus, said the annexation application was approved 7-0 as part of a consent agenda.

The land will be annexed from Brown and Norwich townships into Columbus, but it is in Hilliard City Schools boundaries, said Tom Hart, an attorney representing the developers, Pulte Homes of Ohio and Harmony Development Group.

The next step would be to seek rezoning from the Columbus Development Commission, he said.

“We hope to go before the development commission in March or April,” Hart said.

The commission would render a recommendation but City Council has final approval of the rezoning application, he said.

The development has no official name but is being referred to as the Sugar Farm, a reference to the family who owned most of the land that was annexed Jan. 28, or Renner South, a geographic reference, Hart said.

The land appears to be mostly on the east side of Alton Darby Creek Road, north of Interstate 70 and Renner Road and south of Roberts Road, according to a map provided by Hart.

Meanwhile, some neighbors – even those a few miles away – are watching warily.

“We have many concerns,” said Debi Hampton, president of the Cross Creek Village Civic Association.

Although the civic association is several miles from the proposed development by Pulte Homes of Ohio and Harmony Development Group, it has been acting on behalf of neighbors until the Far West Area Commission for Columbus becomes an official advisory commission to consider such matters, Hampton said.

Columbus City Council on Feb. 4 instituted the Far West Area Commission as Columbus' 20th area commission, said President Pro Tem Michael Stinziano.

"Now they begin the official work of an area commission," Stinziano said.

Area commissions are advisory in nature and offer nonbinding recommendations but Columbus City Council views their input as "significant," he said.

"It's rare we wouldn't follow the recommendation of an area commission," Stinziano said.

Cross Creek is the "designated and constituted" civic association to which the developers are required to present as part of the rezoning process, Hart said.

The Far West Area Commission could make its own recommendation or the Cross Creek Civic Commission could make a recommendation, Stinziano said, and either would be acceptable for Columbus officials to consider.

The developers filed a rezoning application with the annexation petition in August, Hart said.

The annexation will take 30 days, or until Feb. 27, to become effective, he said, and the land would be zoned as rural when it takes effect.

The developers would seek to rezone the land as a planned-unit development, Lohr said.

Before the land was annexed, the Big Darby Accord Advisory Panel on Dec. 11 voted 4-3 to recommend approval of the proposal, he said.

John Bryner, a former Hilliard council member who is a member of the panel, cast the deciding vote to approve the use of the land for the housing development, he said.

"I wasn't 100 percent for or against it. ... I had mixed emotions," said Bryner, who was the last of the seven members present to vote after the first six deadlocked 3-3.

Hilliard is one of 10 local governments that created the Big Darby Accord in 2004 to preserve and protect the Big Darby Creek and its tributaries in western central Ohio, according to bigdarbyaccord.org.

In 2008, Hilliard City Council approved the Big Darby Accord Watershed Master Plan, according to authorizing legislation.

The accord panel, which issues nonbinding recommendations, includes representatives from the cities of Columbus, Grove City and Hilliard, Brown, Norwich, Pleasant, Prairie and Washington townships, the village of Harrisburg and Franklin County, according to Jamie Fisher, Norwich Township administrator.

Another nonbinding recommendation is expected from the Cross Creek Village Civic Association after a development-proposal presentation from Hart on Feb. 6.

Meanwhile, “a significant traffic study” has been completed as part of the rezoning and development proposal, Hart said.

“We have concerns about traffic and about the number of additional students that would go to (Hilliard City) Schools,” Hampton said.

Hart said in addition to communicating with neighbors, the developers have reached out to the school district, including Superintendent John Marschhausen.

“We are proud that developers want to build in our district yet are mindful of the fiscal impact of rapid growth,” Marschhausen said.

“The administration is always appreciative to have a voice in any development to advocate for the school district’s opinion.”

Hart said he did not know how many students the development would add to the district but a “significant majority” of the proposed 1,108 residents are single-family residences, with a small number being apartments and empty-nester housing.

Stacie Raterman, a spokeswoman for the Hilliard district, said district officials have not yet learned the number of students the proposed development might generate, but they have asked a consulting firm, Cooperative Strategies, to do so.

They expect findings “in a few weeks,” she said.

Hart described the single-family residences as “move-up” housing, with list prices of \$325,000 to \$350,000.

If approved, construction would not begin for 18 months to two years and the project has a seven- to 10-year buildout, Hart said.

“(This proposal) has been aired out quite a bit but there remains more to discuss.”

Columbus leaders previously indicated the city has adequate capacity to provide sanitary-sewer and water services for the proposed development, Hart said.

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