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By:
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Image: The leafed-out white oak tree of ?White Oak Place? as seen from Spartan Avenue last fall.

Following a request by the developer Joe Goodsir, East Lansing City Council opted last night to defer decision-making on the White Oak Place project proposal until May 24. Mayor Mark Meadows said the delay will allow the City to seek its own environmental assessment of what is needed in terms of clean-up at the site, which includes a former gas station.

Meadows indicated that Council is interested in learning whether the costs and plan presented by the developer's environmental consultant match what the City's external consultant concludes. The developer is seeking about \$6 million in tax subsidies for the project.

The proposed project, a large rental housing project to be built at the corner of Grand River Avenue and Spartan Avenue, is designed to preserve a large, old, white oak tree while creating one floor of commercial space and five additional floor of rental apartments. It is this oak tree from which the project draws its name.

As ELi's Michael Teager reported for our readers ^[2] last month, the project has raised concerns with regard to possible inadequacy of parking, adding more downtown housing likely to be attractive only to undergraduate students, the large tax subsidy request from the developer, and a question of whether the tree will survive the redevelopment.

At last night's meeting, Meadows invited citizens to weigh in on the matter, saying that they will also have an opportunity to do so at the May 24 meeting. (Citizens can also always write to Council ^[3] on matters before Council.)

During public comments, Ralph Monsma of the Pinecrest neighborhood told Council he was very concerned about whether the plan for environmental clean-up and containment of leaked chemicals at the site was adequate. He said that people are going to be living over the contaminated area so it is very important to get it right. Monsma told Council he also wanted to be sure whatever money the City essentially contributed to the clean-up not be wasted with an inadequate plan.

Mike Vasievich, of the Pinecrest Neighborhood, urged Council to make sure the developer has a sophisticated plan for protecting the old white oak tree after which the project is named and also urged Council to make sure a mechanism is in place to require the developer to adhere to the plan. Saying he "speaks for the trees" of East Lansing, Vasievich asked Council not to approve the plan until there is a clear plan for protecting the tree. He said that the matter requires professional guidance and is "not a trivial matter."

Vasievich noted that Council had previously discussed ^[4] a tree protection ordinance for unique and ancient trees like this one and expressed his disappointment that that draft ordinance appeared not to be moving forward with organized review leading to approval of a tree protection system. Councilmember Shanna Draheim said the Environmental Commission will be concerning itself with the matter. Vasievich said a group has been talking about developing a non-profit organization to push for tree protection in the City of East Lansing.

Read more about the White Oak Place project here ^[2].

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