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## Frustrations flow over Black Field bid process

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Greenville school board continue property discussion, decision expected Aug. 12

*By Cory Smith*

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Greenville resident Bart Brown, spokesperson for the group We Are Greenville, speaks during public comment at Monday's meeting of the Greenville Public Schools Board of Education. Board members continued discussion related to bids from We Are Greenville and the Flat River Community Library, which each aim to purchase Black Field (via donation). — DN Photo | Cory Smith

GREENVILLE — Greenville Public Schools Board of Education members will take another month to further evaluate information from two entities seeking to obtain Black Field before deciding on a potential sale of the property.

During Monday's board meeting, discussion on the subject of potentially selling historic Black Field, which was originally donated to the school district for use as an athletic field in 1915 by Duncan K. Black, continued after receiving bid proposals two months ago – one from Flat River Community Library, the other from the group We Are Greenville, an entity currently working to obtain status as an official 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

The proposal from the library would see the property reutilized for outdoor community and library events, with plans to construct a permanent stage with electrical and sound capabilities and a portion of the field landscaped to create a "natural amphitheater." Additional plans for the property remain fluid as Library Director Stefanie Reed has expressed a desire to receive community input on what additions could be installed, ranging from walking paths to a community garden.

We Are Greenville's proposal calls for the property to remain an athletic venue while maintaining the property's existing facilities and converting the football field into a soccer field, with an additional field proposed to be constructed on the east side of the property.

### A point of division?

In revisiting the subject, board members shared mixed opinions on what direction they might head before coming to a conclusion at its next regular meeting scheduled for Aug. 12.

"I think the library's plan was more specific, with tighter deadlines," Board Vice President Michael Huff said. "As we look to transition this asset away from the school, to a community benefit, I thought that was particularly valuable."

Board President Kire Wierda said in her communications with members of the community, she received support for the library's proposal but had not heard anyone speak the same about the proposal from We Are Greenville.



Stefanie Reed, director of the Flat River Community Library, speaks during public comment at Monday's meeting of the Greenville Public Schools Board of Education. Board members continued discussion related to bids from the library and We Are Greenville, which each aim to purchase Black Field (via donation). — DN Photo | Cory Smith

“I think that the common theme that was shared with me was that there were more varied opportunities for activities or events that would benefit a wide variety of people in the community,” she said of the library’s proposal. “Not that they have a disagreement with sports, but that there would be additional opportunities (with the library’s proposal).”

Trustee Richelle Lentz, however, had remained hopeful that the space used as an athletic field for nearly 100 years by the school district (1915-2011) could continue to be used for athletics.

“I’ve had a few people reach out who have said they are in favor of (the property) at least remaining with the ability for athletics,” she said. “If I’m being honest, that’s kind of the route I thought we would go.”

However, Lentz believes a bigger issue is at play regarding the bidding process.

“Ideally, I think we would have a situation where the two organizations could work together, but based on some of the communication we’ve received, I’m doubtful that’s going to happen,” she said. “I think the biggest concern I have is, regardless of which way we go, I don’t think Black Field should continue to be a point of division in our community. Is this going to be another piece that causes division in our community and is that something we want to be a part of? I’m struggling with that.”

### Questions about We Are Greenville

Questions from the board then shifted to concerns addressed to We Are Greenville. The group’s spokesperson, Greenville resident Bart Brown, was in attendance.

Members of the board expressed concerns over the organizational status of the group and how it would specifically accomplish and fund the plans laid out within the proposal.

“I know the group, and Mr. Brown in particular, is working very hard to get the group registered (as a non-profit), but I don’t know what kind of group it is,” Board Treasurer Jim Anderson said. “Is it a public group? Do you have bylaws? Is there a mission statement?”

Brown explained that the organization has filed for status as a 501(c)(3), resulting in being designated an EIN identifier number by the IRS, which has since allowed We Are Greenville to open a checking account.

“Your answer is yes to every one of those specific questions,” Brown answered.

However, the issuance of an EIN to a non-profit organization is separate and distinct from the organization actually obtaining tax-exempt status from the IRS, resulting in Anderson pressing further.

“I know how the library board is structured and how trustees are selected. How is that done with We Are Greenville?” he asked. “Are there public notices? How many meetings have you had? Are there (meeting) minutes?”

“You have to do that to get the EIN and apply for the 501(c)(3) status and get the bank account ... You have to produce the bylaws, you have to produce the articles of incorporation, you have to produce the EIN,” Brown answered. “You have to produce the minutes of the board meeting, authorizing individuals to sign on that account.”

Anderson said without documentation of those items having been provided to the board as of yet, he still had concerns.

“I haven’t seen the things that you’ve mentioned,” he said. “I think those are key to understanding what kind of a group we are dealing with.”

“You haven’t seen the bylaws of the library, either. You presume they exist ... I don’t have a problem (providing the documents) as long as the library must comply with everything that We Are Greenville has to comply with,” Brown answered. “You need to be even-handed in everything you do in regard to Black Field.”

### ‘I’d actually prefer not to talk about the library’

As Brown continued to answer questions, members of the board began expressing their frustration with his focus on the library and the library’s proposal.

“I think the concern is, the library has posted meetings that we can attend publicly, anyone in the community can do so,” Lentz said. “There’s a posted list of a board of directors that is easily obtainable. So if you can provide us with the frequency of your meetings, how many meetings you’ve had, a list of people on the board, their terms and when those terms expire, that would be very helpful to be sure that we are working with an organization that is in fact well established.”



Greenville Public Schools Board of Education Treasurer Jim Anderson, left, listens as Trustee Richelle Lentz shares her thoughts during Monday’s meeting. Discussion was held on bids from two organizations, the Flat River Community Library and We Are Greenville, which aim to purchase Black Field (via donation) from the school district. — DN Photo | Cory Smith

“The reality of it is, We Are Greenville is something that was established in the last three to four months in response to the bid,” Lentz continued. “The library has been in the community for years. So when we are looking at transferring real property, we want to make sure that it can be maintained by an organization that will be sustainable in the future. That is a big concern, I think, of this board.”

Lentz told Brown that she preferred he refrain from referencing the library in his answers and instead place his focus on We Are Greenville’s proposal.

“What we have continuously asked is that we want to know, what is We Are Greenville bringing to the table and not why the library essentially shouldn’t get it,” she said. “I would ask that when you are answering questions, that you stick to ‘why is it that We Are Greenville is the one we should choose’ and avoid ‘why we shouldn’t choose the library.’ I think right now that’s the sticking point for me ... 90 percent of the conversation has had to do with why the library is the wrong choice, instead of explaining why We Are Greenville is the right choice.”

After asking the board to review previous articles and videos covering the subject of the bid proposals, Brown shifted his focus again to the library.

“I would draw your attention to the written proposal that we submitted, which is more detailed than the library’s,” Brown said. “The reason that We Are Greenville has to do this is because the library, we do not believe is competent to do this ...”

“That’s my point,” Lentz interjected. “Every time we’ve had a conversation, Mr. Brown, your comments are ‘the library is not competent, the library director is not competent,’ but we don’t ever hear directly what your competencies are and why you and your organization is the better choice.”

Brown asked Superintendent Wayne Roedel to forward his resumé and related documents to members of the board for review.

“I have decades of experience with nonprofits, processing more than \$1 million,” Brown said. “I’ve served thousands of people. My resumé is over 60 pages long, Richelle, and that is available to you. Your superintendent has that in a file.”

Again, Lentz asked for information about We Are Greenville.

“Can you provide us with a full list of board members for your organization?” she asked.

“Sure, I can provide you all of those things, that’s not a problem, but understand this is not a public agency, it’s a non-profit organization, which means there is a board that operates by its bylaws,” Brown answered. “It’s a different kind of organization than the library. To try to compare apples and oranges ...”

“I’m not asking to compare apples and oranges, I’m just asking about your organization,” Lentz interjected. “I’d actually prefer not to talk about the library when considering We Are Greenville.”

### Addressing doubt

After additional conversations over the current state of Greenville’s athletic fields and Brown suggesting Black Field would attract the interest of a legacy soccer group, Trustee Charlie Mahar addressed the subject of doubt among members of the board and We Are Greenville.

“Bart, I think you would be wise to understand that your proposal in what you want to do is fine,” he said. “What you have provided, I think, is beneficial to the community. The doubt that probably myself and the rest of this board has is your ability to collaborate with others, to fundraise and run an organization that can see these things through.

“You may not be aware, but you can come across as sort of difficult,” Mahar told Brown. “To entrust this property to an organization that appears to be somewhat managed or run by you, means you are going to have to work with others. You have not done a good job of showing us that you are good at working with others.

“We know what we are getting from the library,” he continued. “We are getting an organization that has been there many, many years. They have funding and they also have a good proposal. So we’d like to hear more about how you are going to do the things you say you are going to do and less about how terrible the library is.”

Additional members of the board followed suit.



Greenville Public Schools Board of Education Trustee Charlie Mahar, left, shares his thoughts as President Kire Wierda listens during Monday’s meeting. Discussion was held on bids from two organizations, the Flat River Community Library and We Are Greenville, which aim to purchase Black Field (via donation) from the school district. — DN Photo | Cory Smith



Greenville Public Schools Board of Education Trustee Brian Gardner, left, listens as Vice President Michael Huff shares his thoughts during Monday’s meeting. Discussion was held on bids from two organizations, the Flat River Community Library and We Are Greenville, which aim to purchase Black Field (via donation) from the school district. — DN Photo | Cory Smith



“I think we need someone or an organization that is a community builder, that can spread positivity,” Board Secretary Maureen Wolverton said. “I think we have one group that has already demonstrated that for us.”

Trustee Brian Gardner went as far as to say he was ready to make a motion to award the purchase of the property to the library.

“I think it’s down to one group and I’m ready to make my decision,” he said.

Wierda, however, said the board would not take action until August as it has additional documents from both organizations to review, with Roedel saying he would share those documents.

“It sounds to me like we’ll be getting additional information on the organization’s structure and who is on that particular board, in order to answer the questions that came up,” he said. “At our August meeting, we’ll have an action item related to (Black Field) and we’ll move forward at that point.”

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