

Chillicothe Gazette

NEWS

Goodwill Industries promises it won't 'split up the neighborhood' at former Tiffin school

Toria Barnhart Chillicothe Gazette

Published 4:55 a.m. ET April 6, 2021

CHILLICOTHE — When a group of homeowners became worried that an area nonprofit was going to split up their neighborhood, they organized a united movement against the project.

It was at the beginning of March when Nena Park, a preschool teacher and single mom, received a letter at her little house across the road from the former Tiffin Elementary School. Sent from a lawyer on behalf of Goodwill Industries, Park learned that they wanted to re-zone the entire 10-acre plot of land from Residential Zoning (R-3) to General Industrial Zoning (GI.)

At the time, she didn't know much about zoning codes, but the letter set off an alarm bell in Park's head. She spoke with her pastor, started to do some research, spoke with more locals and began an online petition called Don't Split Up the Neighborhood.

"I see it as a movement and a means of connecting the neighborhood on an issue that matters," Park said. When she started organizing, her main goal was to notify the public about the rezoning proposal, the problems with it and to find ways to include the neighborhood in the decision.

In October 2020, Goodwill of South Central Ohio entered into a contract with the Chillicothe City School District to purchase the property for \$250,000. At the time, CEO Marvin Jones said that they had "no concrete plans" for the property other than a new warehouse, but that its acquisition would allow the nonprofit to continue its mission.

After acquiring the site, Jones said that the organization applied for a GI zoning permit because they were under the impression that the site could not be divided. As one of the most lenient zoning designations, a GI District establishes industrial activity for permitted uses

like manufacturing, processing, retail outlets, automobile services, and others, according to the Chillicothe Codified Ordinance.

In Chillicothe, the largest GI zone is surrounding Pixelle but there are a few smaller designations near the county border on the east side of town.

With the change in zoning, Park became concerned over the warehouse itself, additional traffic, potential crime and where the area children would play. She was also worried about how property values would be impacted.

And because only a portion of the site was going to be a warehouse, the rest of it was listed as "future development."

"That could mean literally anything," Park said. Regardless of Goodwill's intentions, if the site is sold in the future, it could be developed for industrial use.

Later, Goodwill announced potential ideas for the additional acreage that included a community garden, a greenhouse, a recreation center, a soccer field, a swimming pool and more. But Park and other neighbors felt like they hadn't been involved in the process.

When Jones — a former Tiffin student who grew up in the neighborhood — learned of the project's opposition, he wanted to meet with them. To him, it seemed like there was a misunderstanding.

On March 9, Jones hosted a flagpole meeting at the site to better understand community members' concerns. He emphasized that the nonprofit's original plan is blank, except for the warehouse. Everything else that's been mentioned for the other 4.6 acres of the property is just a possibility, according to Jones.

"It's Goodwill. We won't do anything that will bring harm," Jones said. He added that Goodwill has no plans to sell any portion of the land.

Since that meeting, Goodwill has adjusted its zoning application and is now only seeking rezoning for the warehouse portion of the property. The rest of the lot will remain R-3.

As the plans progress, Jones said Goodwill will meet with people in the disability community as well as other area nonprofits to see if there is potential for collaboration. He affirmed that the organization remains open to hearing ideas from the community.

Park is hopeful the spot-zoning is a good sign for the future and is thankful that the community will remain intact.

"Regardless of what happens to the property, one impact has been that we rallied together. We showed we care," she said.

The Planning Commission will meet on April 13 to determine if Goodwill's proposed zoning will be approved. If so, Goodwill hopes to start construction on the warehouse by late summer with work completed by early next year.

Have a story tip or comment? Contact Toria at tbarnhart@gannett.com or 740-349-1106. Follow her on Twitter @ToriaBarnhart.