

Update on Weiss Farm

The Town's management, Boards, and Committees are dealing with many issues relating to the development at Weiss Farm, and yet there still remains the feeling among some residents that the Town is not doing enough. While much of what is being done takes place in a public forum, there are times when the Town must discuss its response in a confidential setting (such as Executive session) where its strategy is not revealed to Corcoran & Company, its advisers, or its Counsel. I will say that every option is on the table and we have exhausted a few of them already. As most of you are aware John Corcoran & Company, at the insistence of MassHousing, had a meeting with the town on Monday May 19th to discuss their proposed 264 unit development at Weiss Farm. Despite our calls for collaboration and design input with the goal of a plan that would satisfy both parties, Corcoran simply presented the same project that they showed us in January with very minor alterations. It was abundantly clear that they treated this meeting as a formality and plan to proceed with the application for an eligibility letter from MassHousing based on the current design regardless of the fact that at Monday's meeting Corcoran admitted that the design that they were showing us was not the final plan.

There has been a lot of discussion about a possible land swap involving the Stoneham Oaks and Weiss Farm, and sensing that the window of opportunity was closing, the Town Administrator, the Town Counsel and I had met with Richard High, CEO and Peter Mahoney of Corcoran & Company last Wednesday morning. We discussed a lot of things including the Oaks and we went as far as to tour the facilities there. They are very interested in the idea although it is not without its logistical challenges. The first one being public support for the swap, as it would need a two thirds vote at town meeting and most likely have to be placed on the ballot.

Article 97: Stoneham Oaks is a unique property because it is designated with Article 97. Years ago Stoneham received both Federal money and an interest free loan to purchase and build the Oaks under the stipulation that Article 97 would be placed on the land. Article 97 stipulates that the land must be used as open space perpetually. Since that time the laws have changed providing us with the opportunity to transfer the open space designation someplace else within the town. Stoneham Oaks has approximately 13 acres which could be transferred over to Weiss Farm, netting Stoneham 26 acres of free space.

Why is this a good idea?

- 1) Although Stoneham is fortunate enough to have two golf courses, the Oaks consistently underperforms and loses about \$40,000 a year not including the cost of DPW labor to maintain it. I would also argue that although it is open space, the only people it benefits are golfers as other residents are not able to sit and have a picnic, for example, on this land. Further, unless you are a golfer who enjoys par 3 golf, chances are that do not utilize the Oaks. There is also a fee to golf, not exactly meeting my definition of open space.
- 2) By transferring this land we can archive our minimum affordable housing requirement thus protecting us in the future from another developer coming into Stoneham and dictating what they are going to build, how dense the proposed development will be, and where said development will be placed all under the guise of 40B. The Town would be compelled once again to possibly expend hundreds of thousands of dollars to fight another project that is too large and doesn't fit into our one of our neighborhoods.
- 3) Location - The proposed Commons at Weiss Farm does not belong in a neighborhood where public transportation is not readily accessible or stores and other conveniences are not nearby. Because nothing is within walking distance this project at Weiss Farm will exacerbate an already congested roadway on which Stoneham High School is located. School redistricting will require

more traffic from other parts of town to use Franklin Street in order to get to and from Colonial Park. Moving this project to the Oaks will better meet Smart Growth Housing principles because of the proximity to public transportation, banks, restaurants, doctors' offices, convenient Stores, drycleaners, office parks and coffee shops. In addition to the above amenities, a location at the Oaks will offer access to recreational facilities like Unicorn Golf Course, the Stoneham Arena, and the soon to be built Bike Path. The Oaks location would also be more suitable to a retail element being incorporated into the design. A Project like this would not only help to revitalize Montvale Ave. but money from the increased tax revenue, estimated at minimally \$300,000 per year, could be earmarked to maintain and preserve open space in town.

- 4) Weiss Farm becomes a blank canvas for open space. One idea is to build turf fields behind the barn that they could be utilized by SHS as well as town teams. Having two fields would allow Stoneham to host tournaments and one byproduct would be driving consumers downtown to eat and shop between games. The barns could be used for a multitude of purposes including concessions and/or locker rooms. They could also be used to store tables and tents that could be used on the fields for a farmer's markets, outdoor concerts, or art shows to name a few ideas. In addition to the fields, apple orchards or pumpkin patches could be planted along walking trails, farming co-ops or agricultural education could be incorporated into the plan. This truly preserves Stoneham's identity of the first bedroom community north of Boston with a small town New England feel, highlighted by Weiss Farm.
- 5) Some people have suggested that the town buy the land. In a utopian world, that would be possible, but the land is not for sale; it's under agreement. According to the purchase and sales agreement the selling price was over \$7 million and even if it was an option it would be irresponsible for the town to spend that kind of money on this land when the high school is in need of at least \$20 million in repair/renovation. If the town were to do this the only way we could recoup that money would be by selling it off as a large housing development.

Corcoran & Company will continue to negotiate with us on the Oaks contingent upon town support, however, in the mean time they will go to MassHousing to apply for an eligibility letter on the project as they presented last Monday. With that being said, it is imperative that we continue to fight The Commons at Weiss Farm because even if the town desires the swap, and we negotiate in good faith, should the deal with the Oaks fall we would be left completely unprotected on the 264 units off of Franklin Street.

Regards
Tom Boussy