

Petition drive will determine fate of Westfield Library project

Thursday, 13 September 2007

It is on

Westfield property owners will undertake a petition drive to decide the fate of plans to replace the town's library with a new building away from downtown.

Tuesday, the library board voted 5-0 to accept a remonstrance petition containing 102 signatures against plans to build a new \$16.9 million library on property owned by Westfield Washington Schools at 196th Street and Tomlinson Road. The decision puts the future of the project in the hands of area residents.

Board members did not allow members of the public to speak until after their vote, did not discuss any opinions presented to them and ignored requests to continue discussion about the project.

"We have talked for four years and we are finished talking," library board member Bob Richardson said. **"I don't care what anyone says tonight.** This petition will be carried."

Westfield resident David Mueller suggested the board expand the library on its current site, 333 W. Hoover St.

Community members were led to believe the library could not expand because of nearby wetland, but a soil study by JF New Full Service Economical Solutions proved this to be untrue.

The library has adequate room to construct an addition to its current building, Melody Sweat, Washington Township parks director, said.

Mueller suggested library board members look at the potential expansion site during the petition drive process. The board did not consider his suggestion.

"We're not going to discuss this," Richardson said. "(Mueller) has an opportunity to speak, and then he's going to sit down."

Town councilman Robert Horkay asked board members to continue dialogue during the 29-day "cooling off period" required by law before the petition drive can start.

He also asked if the library board would like input from the town council. Library board members did not answer.

"We did not ask for this," Richardson said. "The (102) people who signed this petition are the ones who asked for this."

Library board members have publicly discussed plans for a new library since 2003. The board initially reviewed six sites for construction. The Tomlinson Road site was cheapest by as much as \$700,000, Richardson said.

Also, the Tomlinson Road site is in the midst of Westfield's population boom, which is causing other services to move west of U.S. 31, Richardson said.

He cited the recently approved Eagletown development, which will bring more than 3,600 homes west of town.

The post office and public safety building have already moved west of U.S. 31 in response to population growth, he said.

What's next

The library board has 30 days to publish a notice about the pending petition drive.

Then, after a 30-day cooling off period, supporters and opponents of the project race to collect the most signatures.

If supporters collect the most signatures, the library board will go forward with its plans to replace the library with a new building at 196th Street and Tomlinson Road.

If opponents gather the most signatures, their petition ends the library project.

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Correction on Article:

The Library has no time limit on posting a notice about the pending petition drive. When they do post the notice on that day is when the 30 day cooling off period begins.