

# Merrillville Town Council extends bidding deadline for Fieldhouse

BY KAREN CAFFARINI

The Merrillville Town Council voted to extend the deadline for bids on the former Fieldhouse basketball building until Aug. 31.

The deadline was scheduled at 4:30 p.m. Friday.

The town, which recently took ownership of the building, planned to use the approximately \$2 million it expects to receive from the sale after \$950,000 in debt is paid to finance a portion of the operating costs of the new Merrillville Community & Recreation Center, possibly for as long as three years.

"(I'm) not really sure what would happen if we do not receive any interest up to Aug. 31. It might be time at that point to then do an actual listing with a commercial real estate company," Council President Rick Bella, D-5th, said.

He said if that's the case, the council would need to add the commission cost to the listing price of the building.

Bella said the regular town budget couldn't sustain continued support of operating the community center now under construction, which is estimated to cost \$600,000 a year.

"There could be a time when program fees will fund a portion of the estimated (\$600,000) annual operating budget, but not sure how long that might take to get there. The other unknown is if (\$600,000) annually will cover all expenses," Bella said.

He said there are two issues that may be hurting the building's marketability: its size and the fact that it's being put up for sale during a time of economic uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

He said the building is more than 52,000 square feet with 300 parking spaces, which would house a rather large company.

"Perhaps this just might be the absolute worst time



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to try to sell a building like this. We remain optimistic, though, and the town is reaching out to many contacts in the region and out of state to see if we can spark some interest in the building," Bella said.

The town took ownership of the building after a deal with a South Korean pharmaceutical company to purchase it fell through.

The council and state Rep. Lisa Beck, D-Hebron, recognized Jim Donohue, who recently retired as assistant chief of the Merrillville Police Department after serving the department for 38 years.

Donohue also sits on the Merrillville School Corp. board.

Beck said she presented a state award to Donohue on behalf of herself and fellow state Reps. Venon Smith, D-Gary, and Michael Aylesworth, R-Lowell.

Among Donohue's many accomplishments cited by Beck were his being named officer of the year twice, being named a master instructor, once serving as interim police chief and serving on the school board.

Bella said Donohue, recently retired police Chief Joseph Petrucci and police Lt. Robert Morgan all received Lifetime Achievement awards from the District 1 Law Enforcement

Council as well.

"You've always gone above and beyond. It's been an honor to know you and work with you," Bella told Donohue.

The council also accepted a donation of two parcels of land in Ward 5 that will become the ward's first park or open space. The property was donated by a Florida-based real estate company.

Parks director Jan Orlich said new playground equipment is being installed at Crescent Lake Park and should be ready for use by mid-September.

Councilman Shawn Pettit, D-6th, announced that the Carriage House demolition is scheduled to begin on Aug. 3, and Bella said Merrillville ranks 12th of 19 communities regarding responding to the 2020 census, a dismal number he hopes will improve.

Bella had embarked on a campaign, competing with neighboring communities over which would get the highest response rate.

He said Merrillville's response now stands at 64.9%.

He urged residents to respond to the census.

"It's vitally important to the town for the next 10 years," Bella said.

*Karen Caffarini is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.*

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