

VILLAGE OF ELLSWORTH

130 N CHESTNUT STREET, ELLSWORTH, WI 54011 | PHONE 715-273-4742 | FAX 715-273-6460

June 8, 2022

Dear fellow community members,

I would like to provide an update on the purchase of the old junior high building, located at 254 S Chestnut Street. This has been the “white elephant” in the community for several years. The property was sold by the school district for \$1 in 2005 in good faith that it would become a dinner theatre, then sold to a close-out warehouse company (where it was later condemned, with 16 tons of rotting food inside <https://bit.ly/3MslaC3>), then sold to the current owners who are using it as a salvage storage facility. It has a long and challenging past. Year after year the property has continued to deteriorate and generate many complaints to the village and police department.

The property is not only an eyesore, but a drain on our property tax base. A property that could be producing a tax base of \$50,000-\$100,000 each year has only been generating \$2500. The topic of “the old junior high” came up time and again during our comprehensive plan update this spring, ranking at or near the top of the list of issues residents would like to see addressed in our community. Overwhelmingly, residents want this issue dealt with once and for all.

The current owners of the property contacted the Village several weeks ago expressing an interest in selling and asking if the Village was interested in purchasing the property. The Village Board approved to extend a purchase agreement at the May 2 board meeting in the amount of \$25,000 (the amount of the last property sale 10 years ago). The offer was accepted. The Village will be using a portion of our American Rescue Act Plan (ARPA) funds for this purchase, so these dollars will not come out of the general fund. The sale will close on August 1.

I feel this is the right step forward. Chances of someone (a developer, investor, etc.) suddenly coming in to save this building is slim, and we run the risk of continued issues or having to legally issue a raze order in the future. As so often is the case, the owner who was not able to invest in maintenance or repairs to the building is also not able to afford the demolition, which means village residents would have to front the cost. At that point we must attempt to recover the dollars spent on the demolition, which is difficult, expensive and, in the past, had not been successful. So, after the dust settles (literally), the owners still own the property and profit from it. I find this scenario to be very unfair to village taxpayers.

This is a proactive and empowering approach that will provide us some control into the development of the property, allowing us to decide what happens with that property in the future, how best to integrate it back into the neighborhood, and eventually recover our investment!

The Village’s Community Development Authority (CDA) started pulling together a plan at their May 12 meeting to make a proposal to Pierce County for a portion of their ARPA funds to help pay for the cost of demolition. The county would benefit, too. By investing those funds into a project that will increase both housing stock and tax base, both the village and the county come out ahead. We will go before the county’s ARPA ad hoc committee on June 21.

The Board is also pursuing the option of turning this property into a Blighted Tax Incremental District (TID) for residential use. Doing so will offer the village the means to pay back any costs associated with the project using the increase in tax base from the property. Our goal is to utilize this approach so there will be no tax impact to village residents. There will be a Joint TID Review Board meeting in the future to discuss this option. All adjacent landowners will be notified of this meeting, I recommend you all attend to learn about using a TID in this situation.

At this time, there has not been any final decisions made about development of the site, other than there is a critical need for housing in our community. This is another issue brought forward during comprehensive planning discussions. Further discussions will take place at future CDA and Village Board meetings. Please watch our meeting notices (on our website or in The Pierce County Journal newspaper) for upcoming meetings and more details.

I strive for transparency here in the Village. Please remember that you will learn the most by attending our Village meetings. However, not every topic or angle of every topic will be discussed at every meeting. Due to open meeting laws, we must strictly adhere to our posted agendas.

Know we are working strategically and methodically through this process with the village's future and best interests as our top priority.

Thank you for your support of our community,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rebecca Beissel".

Rebecca Beissel
President, Village of Ellsworth