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Needham residents debate senior center proposal

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Photo by Jeff Fitzgerald

By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

Dozens of Needham residents passionately addressed town officials during a three-hour hearing on a proposed new senior center Monday night and though no one questioned the need for a new center, controversy centered on Greene's Field - one of three sites being considered for the project.

"The single biggest obstacle is determining the location where to put the center at," said Board of Selectmen Chair Daniel Matthews in his opening remarks. "I think most people who came here already have an opinion on this."

After a year-long study on the proposal, an exploratory committee gave an hour-long presentation on its findings to a crowd of around 150 and to the Board of Selectmen, who said they may make a decision by the end of the month based on the committee's upcoming recommendations.

Of the three site locations currently under consideration, the committee said their survey results show the most-preferred location is Greene's Field.

However, those in favor of protecting the field - many wearing green ribbons, gift bows or T-shirts in support - were quick to question the accuracy of the study's findings and countered with arguments against building a senior center on the downtown park area.

Besides losing the 2.5 acres of outdoor recreational space, opponents to the Greene's Field site argued that the lot size is not large enough to accommodate future expansion, which the committee said during its presentation was an important factor in deciding where to build.

Additionally, advocates for preserving Greene's Field said they have gathered over 2,000 signatures on a petition that welcomes a new senior center that is built on another suitable location besides the field.

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But others see the field as an ideal location for seniors to be within a short distance of many services around the downtown area. Several elderly residents expressed a feeling of being pushed aside and underappreciated by younger families wanting to use the real estate for themselves.

Some speakers expressed a desire to share the land as both a park space and senior center, though others suggested such an idea was not feasible because of space limitations.

The other proposed sites are a 37-acre parcel at Rosemary Hill and a 20-acre site at Ridge Hill.

The Senior Center Exploratory Committee said the town's senior population is at 22 percent and growing, and its current senior center in the basement of the Stephen Palmer School is not adequate.

The committee is considering a center about 18,000 square feet with around 100 parking spaces

The committee will meet again later this week to consider information presented at the public hearing and will make final recommendations by next week to the selectmen who hope to decide how to spend feasibility money for a new senior center at their Dec. 26th meeting.

The town's plan is to have its feasibility study recommendations complete by late spring, request design funding in November, seek construction funding a year later, and open the doors on a new senior center no later than early 2013.

At the hearing's conclusion, Selectmen Maurice Hamel told a dwindling crowd that residents should focus on reaching a compromise.

"We need to find something a majority of the town will approve," he said.

Selectmen John Bulian added that, "there are too many questions left about all three sites and we have to work at answering them."

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