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Ayer: Make Devens a town

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AYER -- After more than three hours of contentious deliberation, selectmen approved a complex proposal recommending that the Devens Disposition Executive Board pursue further action in support of turning Devens into a municipality by 2010.

The proposal, however, passed with the stipulation that if any of the other five stakeholders in the redevelopment of Fort Devens vote no on the so-called scenario 2B, Ayer would instead favor scenario 1, which is to divide the former base along the historic town lines of Ayer, Harvard and Shirley.

In addition, the 10-point proposal, which included six amendments, stated that the redevelopment plan for Ayer's North Post will include commercial-industrial development and a maximum of 200 homes.

That particular article garnered the most discussion and received recommended revisions by Selectmen Frank Maxant, Pauline Conley and Connie Sullivan.

Conley suggested that the article reflect that a minimum of 100 of the proposed 200 units be set aside for seniors as a concession because she does not favor housing there, while Maxant indicated he would like the phrase concerning housing stricken from the article.

Sullivan's amendment, which was nearly identical to the original except that it stated that "a minimum" of 20 acres be set aside for recreation space, narrowly passed, however, 3-2.

Additional articles said the environmental cleanup shall be done to applicable standards at no cost to Ayer, and funding to complete the MacPherson Road corridor upgrades will be provided by MassDevelopment, among others.

Several residents in attendance, however, expressed concern that the proposal was moving too fast in a direction that would not be favorable to Ayer.

Planning Board member Patricia Walsh said too many people are confused with the intricate details, and not enough time has been given to discuss the plans openly.

"You have to have worked in town government to understand it," she said. "We keep moving forward without answers."

Selectman Paul Bresnahan defended the board's actions in response by saying they "hit a political wall" when it came to scenario 1.

"We've been very outspoken about that choice, but we're the only ones saying it," he said.

"The best place for us to come from here is not a negative place," selectmen Chairwoman Faye Morrison added. "No one is carrying a bigger yoke than the other. It's a complicated issue. Nothing is black and white."

From here, the board's decision will be delivered to the DDEB on Feb. 16 before a Memorandum of Understanding is developed by early April.

It is expected that the question of supporting scenario 2B will go on the warrants for special town meetings in Ayer, Shirley and Harvard in October, then placed on the general-election ballots in November. The results would then be sent to the state Legislature.

Morrison concluded that now is the time to get momentum on the issue.

"We haven't closed any doors with what we're doing tonight," she said. "It's hard to work from a minority, (but) walking away from the table is not going to get us anything else."