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Ayer split on Devens zoning

By JACK MINCH, Sun Staff
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AYER -- Residents agreed the town needs more affordable housing but were split last night on whether the former Fort Devens North Post should be zoned for mixed-use to include housing or simply commercial-industrial use.

Selectmen are expected to vote Tuesday on whether to support a mixed-use zoning that would allow some commercial-industrial, recreation and housing. Their decision is scheduled to be delivered to the Devens Disposition Executive Board on Feb. 16.

When Selectman Pauline Conley asked for a show of hands in support of mixed-use, about nine people raised their hands. About seven people raised their hands in support of commercial-industrial. Chairman Faye Morrison cautioned that such a small sampling is not an accurate picture of the town's sentiments.

"I think there are a lot of issues to be discussed before we decide how we want North Post zoned," said resident Pat Walsh, a member of the town planning board and Devens Disposition Executive Board.

Residents also expressed irritation toward MassDevelopment for appearing to influence zoning.

"I equate this to somebody building a house, painting it, decorating it, then saying, 'Here, you live in it and pay for it,'" said Edward Kelley.

As part of its redevelopment of the former Fort Devens, MassDevelopment wants to put up 1,800 homes, including 200 on North Post. The homes can only be built on North Post if it's zoned for as a mixed-use district.

MassDevelopment owns the land that was the former Fort Devens and the out-parcels of land such as North Post in Ayer.

"When we talk about 1,800 homes, we're talking about a 20-year span," said MassDevelopment Executive Vice President Bill Burke.

The Devens Disposition Executive Board recently chose to support the so-called scenario 2B, in which Devens is formed into a municipality by 2010.

Its other finalist option, the so-called scenario 1, was to divide the former base roughly along town lines in Ayer, Harvard and Shirley.

Ayer's representatives to the Devens Disposition Executive Board prefer scenario 1, but once they realized they were outvoted on the board decided to support the second scenario as a matter of political expediency to get the best deal for the town, said Selectman Paul Bresnahan, who serves on the board.

"We have to work with MassDevelopment in order to achieve our objectives," said Town Administrator Shaun Suhoski.

Key points for Ayer in scenario 2B also include the reconstruction of McPherson Road, protection of the Grove Pond well and protection of the McPherson well field, as well as privileged access to recreation fields at Devens.

However, Ayer would have to pay fees to use the fields, according to Richard Montuori, MassDevelopment's senior vice president of operations.

"There seems to be a lot of promises that aren't in writing, and I hope they're put in writing," said Martha Craft.

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