

Prairie Township

## Trustees move forward with agreement

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Prairie Township trustees have re-approved a resolution that would enable the township to enter into a franchise agreement with Ohio American Water for water and sewer services.

The resolution, originally approved 2-1 by trustees on April 13, was rescinded at an early morning special meeting on April 19 because the document did not include a necessary attachment when it was approved the first time. The attachment is a map of the service area.

The missing attachment was brought to the attention of the township when resident Steve Kennedy went to the clerk's office requesting the document be certified so he could start the referendum process regarding the approved agreement.

The amended version of the resolution was passed once again by a 2-1 vote. Trustee Doug Stormont voted against it both times.

Also in relation to the franchise agreement, trustees voted 3-0 at the April 13 board meeting to accept an engineering plan completed by GGC Engineers for its evaluation of 96 acres of land adjacent to O'Harra Road owned by Dr. Paul Gutheil. The land in question is bisected by Hellbranch Run and could be a possible site of a wastewater treatment plant.

Trustees then voted 2-1 in favor of initiating the process of an appraisal for the tract of land to be conducted by Coon & Associates. Stormont voted against the appraisal.

The franchise agreement between the township and Ohio American Water Company sets the foundation for future development of the township when it comes to water and wastewater services to certain unincorporated areas.

Resident Neil Distelhorst, who attended both meetings, said he had problems with trustees approving such legislation when there may be a chance that Columbus would offer water and sewer services without annexation.

He said it also bothered him that the public didn't get to see the map, a key exhibit to the resolution.

Trustee Joe Wharton said the township's pursuit of water and sewer services has been ongoing for the last four years.

"I am not going to put us in a position where Columbus has all the authority and dictates where things go," Wharton said. "This is about new development in the township."

Distelhorst said somewhere in the agreement it should state that if Columbus offers water and sewer services, the township doesn't have to proceed with the agreement.

"I don't think it's in the best interest of the township," Wharton said.

Keller said the possibility of the city of Columbus giving the township water and sewer service without annexation came up in talks related to the Big Darby Accord.

"Our plan B is to provide our own sewer and water if Columbus doesn't," Keller said. "As a township, we want more control of what happens in our area. We need to protect and preserve what we have."

Stormont said there are several reasons why he voted against the franchise agreement.

"I've been in office 16 months and talked to Ohio American Water one time," Stormont said. "My issue with it is the cost."

Darby Estates has Ohio American Water, he said, and those residents pay at least \$100 per month.

"The cost there is so high," Stormont said.

If the township would put a water and sewer treatment facility on the 96 acres of land adjacent to O'Harra Road, it would be subject to stricter regulations, therefore creating a high water bill, he said.

Stormont said that Ohio American Water isn't willing to put any money down for the purchase of property to place its water and sewer treatment facility.

"Ohio American wants us to buy the land to put the plant on," he said. "Why aren't they willing to put out the money? There are too many issues left unanswered before going into a franchise."

Stormont said the decisions recently made by the trustees as a whole don't reflect his philosophy.

"For some reason, there are several issues being pushed and no one is listening to the citizens," he said. "Each has their own agenda."

Stormont said he was against going forward with the appraisal but did approve accepting the engineering study because it was already paid for.

Trustee Teresa Keller said Stormont has had several opportunities to talk to representatives from Ohio American Water. There have also been several opportunities for him to attend meetings where the company has met with residents in Darby Estates to hash out their issues, she said.

As far as the company purchasing the land for the building of a water and sewer treatment facility, Ohio American Water said it is willing to lease that portion of the land back to the township, Keller said.

The rest of the land can could possibly be used for stormwater management purposes, a community center or park as defined in the engineering study.

"This is to provide the township some way to service themselves without being annexed," Keller said. "The plan, the franchise agreement and the appraisal need to be sequential."

Kennedy asked trustees at the April 13 meeting how they could approve an agreement with no public discussion of it before hand.

"I want everything out in the open," Kennedy said. "Nobody wants to proceed with this. You're trying to get it done before November and I have a problem with it."

He said he hasn't talked to one Darby Estates resident who has been happy about their water and sewer with Ohio American Water.

"Why would you open up the rest of the township with someone with that kind of track record," he said.

Kennedy said the franchise agreement goes against everything the Big Darby Accord is about.

"There is nobody who wants a water and sewer plant on the Hellbranch," he said. "They are opening up the township for mass development."

Kennedy, who also started the referendum process when trustees approved a Property Maintenance Code, will proceed with the process once again regarding the franchise agreement.

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