

Land adjoining Indian Mound considered for possible park

By Barbara McRae

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The availability of property adjoining the Nikwasi Mound on East Main Street, Franklin, brought several parties together Wednesday to brainstorm funding possibilities and the potential use of the land as a public space.

"We're here about opportunity," said Gordon Mercer of the Nikwasi Planning Committee, who convened the meeting on July 29, in the board room of the Macon Campus of Southwestern Community College.

As Mercer and others described it, the vision driving the meeting was the opportunity to increase the green space at the mound, create a park with interpretive features, enhance the Greenway and establish an attractive entrance to the town.

Participants included representatives of the town of Franklin, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the Franklin Main Street program, the Macon County Historical Society, the Native American Cultural Sites Preservation Project, the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee and the property owners and their representatives. Slade Gleaton, the North Carolina representative of the Trust for Public Lands, drove from his home in Charleston, S.C., to attend.

The property in question comprises two commercial lots just east of the mound in downtown Franklin: the .6-acre Gene Huscusson property, asking price \$500,000, and the .42-acre Simpson Gas and Oil tract, asking price \$750,000. Bob Simpson, who represented the Simpson interests at the meeting, said he plans to give back \$50,000 to the project.

According to the county website, the Huscusson property has a tax valuation of \$432,010, which includes buildings assessed at \$144,000. The Simpson tract is valued at \$253,060, including buildings assessed at \$43,060.

Mercer recalled the Nikwasi celebration of 2008, which brought hundreds of people to the mound and the Big Bear Park across the street. He said it stimulated interest in the mound and left people asking what could be done to get some kind of park there.

He described the mound as one of the most historic sites in the area and spoke of the strong commitment shown by the town and its citizens to preserve it.

Mercer turned the meeting over to Vera Holland Guise, his associate at Western Carolina University, who described the mound as a "beautiful, striking historic site at the beginning of Franklin."

Mayor Joe Collins agreed, saying the town is "very proud" of the Indian Mound and expends significant effort to maintain it.

"You get an opportunity every so often," Collins said. "This is one that's come along."

An expanded park at the mound would be "beautifying and unifying," he said.

"It's too unique of an opportunity" not to explore, the mayor said,

Nikwasi Mound was one of the "metropolitan areas" along the Little Tennessee before and after the contact period, said Russell Townsend of the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, who spoke about the site's significance.

Many of the families who would form the Eastern Band originated in the Middle Towns, he said.

"Development has obliterated the archaeological significance but (the mound) is still a very important landmark," Townsend said. "I've always appreciated that Franklin has taken care of the mound."

"Personally," he said, "I would like to see the tribe participate."

Ashleigh Brown, representing the office of Chief Michell Hicks, conveyed the chief's appreciation of the town's care of the Nikwasi Mound and emphasized his interest in educating the public about the Cherokee. She also said she felt the Cherokee Preservation Foundation would be very interested in the project.

Gleason described the role the TPL could possibly play in the acquisition and development of the tracts.

"I can see the beginning of something very special here in Franklin," he said. "There may be a place for TPL... or it may be something the community can do on its own."

In general, he said, TPL does not acquire easements or hold property. It puts together land transactions to bring land that is in the private sector into the public sector.

"Each transaction is its own dance," he said, referring to the various ways projects with multiple funding sources come to fruition.

"There is an opportunity here for an interesting and dynamic story in the years ahead."

The first step, he said, is to determine the price. The second step is to find the funding.

Grassroots support will be critical, Gleason said.

"We need to figure out if there's a common desire, and come up with a common goal," Collins said.

Mickey Duval, director of economic development for the Tribe, described the steps involved in seeking tribal support for a land purchase. He could begin the process by next week, he said, but he warned that the difficult economy has frozen land acquisitions for the present.

"That's not to say that we couldn't do some kind of creative financing," Duval said. He also indicated that stimulus money might be available.

Gleason said it was important to look ahead beyond the acquisition costs and think about what other steps will be necessary to make the project work. "A concept plan is one of the best tools to have," he advised.

Both landowners expressed their desire to see the property become a park of some kind. Huscusson said that other parties are interested in his tract, but "I want the Cherokee to buy it or for it to be preserved."

Simpson said his father had told him he would like the land to become a park.

"It complements Franklin so much. It complements the mound. A park would be wonderful," he said, adding that he has plans for the tract "if this doesn't work out."

Paul Carlson of the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee said the project would enlarge the green space of the mound and would be "one more pearl in the necklace" of the Little Tennessee.

After further discussion, the group formed a smaller working committee to look at the specifics of getting appraisals, securing options and proceeding with the project. The full committee will meet again on Sept. 2.