Our Forum

More details needed on farmers market

Amber Wells was generous in describing the proposed ownership of a farmers market, restaurant and retail building at the Grange at 10Main as "very vague."

The Isle of Wight Economic Development Authority board member wondered aloud whether the EDA really had a choice on committing to own the building after two years of planning that has occurred mostly out of public view. She joined her colleagues in voting unanimously to agree "in concept" to partnering with the town and county as the structure's landlord "subject to the negotiation of terms acceptable" to the board.

It's past time to bring clarity to the murkiness.

As background, more than two years ago, Grange developer Joseph Luter IV and his father, former Smithfield Foods Chairman Joseph Luter III, offered land and $1 million toward the construction of what as of the Grange's 2023 rezoning was proposed as single-story building with 2,550 square feet of rental retail space, an attached 7,350-square-foot restaurant that would operate under condominium-style private ownership and the farmers market. As of Feb. 22, a revised illustration showed 48 covered market stalls, a two-story restaurant and a 1.3-acre "village green."

According to County Attorney Bobby Jones, the EDA would be the project's fiscal agent and landlord as part of a three-party agreement among the EDA, town and county.

The Luters' offer required the town and county to each contribute $1.4 million to the structure. Each governing body voted to approve its share in October 2022, but whether that vote was binding is now a matter of debate during a heated town election season. Several candidates say that, if elected, they won't feel obligated to spend the money a prior council committed.

Next week's Town Council election will go a long way toward determining whether the new market is ever built – and whether voters want it to be built.

Luter IV and the EDA can improve the odds by putting forth a firm plan with details, especially as it relates to the participation of town and county taxpayers and the return, if any, on the investment they are being asked to make.

We're also concerned about the proposed condominium-style ownership that would put a big portion of the building, the restaurant space, under private ownership in an otherwise taxpayer-owned structure. Again, as the old saying goes, the devil will be in the details.

The October 2022 decisions to pledge town and county money to this project were rushed. One of the reasons for rushing at the time remains unresolved. The town's lease of the farmers market's current space behind the Bank of Southside Virginia on Main Street was reported to be expiring. The agreement has since limped along with year-to-year extensions, officials say.

That question needs clarity along with many others in the weeks ahead.