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FEATURED

Brownland Farm development plan remains stalled as pros and cons get sorted out

By John McBryde
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Photo by John McBryde

For nearly 60 years, Brownland Farm has been a fixture in Franklin and often the center of some of the nation's most notable equestrian events. X

Founded in 1963 by Mack and Sissie Anderton, the 200-acre farm has served as a training ground for countless horses and riders. And along the way, Brownland Farm and the Anderton family have been a key component of the greater Franklin community that lies beyond its entrance near the intersection of Hillsboro Road and the nearly completed Mack Hatcher extension.

But here lately...

"I feel like this is a witch trial, it's so funny," Michelle Anderton said recently. "My family has taken personal attacks, name calling, hateful remarks over social media and dozens of trespassers over the past 2½ years. X

"At a time when mental health is at the forefront of [society's] concern, why are we supposed to be immune from the pain this can cause? It's not so much about property rights, it's simple humanity."

'Good for Franklin'

Anderton and her husband, Robin Anderton, owners of Brownland Farm, were among many speaking out at the most recent Franklin Board of Mayor and Aldermen meeting about the proposed development for their property. The Andertons are working with Greg Gamble of Gamble Design Collaborative and others to sell the land and have it developed into a

residential community with 205 single-family homes, 177 townhomes, 24 multiplex units and 64X multifamily units. The proposal would also include three miles of walking trails, a pool, clubhouse and fishing pond.

“We care too much about this community to choose somebody who’s not right for this project,” Anderton continued. “I truly believe these gentlemen are fully committed to making sure this development is good for Franklin.”

Others differ on its being good for Franklin, and have since this project was first presented in 2019. It has pitted expert against expert, neighbor against neighbor, and has even split the opinions of the congregation at nearby Christ Community Church, which also has a vested interest in the plan. There have been neighborhood meetings on the topic, previous discussions at BOMA work sessions, plan revisions, and a thumbs-down from city of Franklin staff and through a vote from the Planning Commission earlier this summer.



All available seats were taken at the Franklin Board of Mayor and Aldermen meeting Tuesday night, when a public hearing was held on the topic of Brownland Farm's proposed development.

Photo by John McBryde

Nearly 30 speakers took to the podium Tuesday night to express reasons they were either for or against the proposed development, and those public comments and discussions among board members lasted about two hours. Ultimately, aldermen voted 6-1 on a rezoning ordinance and agreed to defer until the board's Oct. 12 meeting a resolution to approve a development plan for the property. Alderman-at-Large Ann Petersen was the nay vote and Ward 2 Alderman Dana McLendon was absent.

"As hard as we try to facilitate development approvals and make sure we get it right, this one has been challenging," Assistant City Administrator Vernon Gerth said at the meeting. ... "There's always merit to following Envision Franklin because we do take our time in ensuring that plan reflects the expectations of the city to help promote quality and safe development."

A guide for city planning

Envision Franklin is the long-range planning guide for the city, and Planning Supervisor Amy Diaz-Barriga thumps it to justify why staff has recommended disapproval of the project. Staff summary reads, in part:

The Brownland Farm Development Plan proposes a mix of housing options across a grid of street network, and provides a variety of open spaces that are easily accessible to the proposed residents of the development. On another site in a different Design Concept, staff would most likely support this development. However, staff cannot support the plan as shown because several key components of the plan are not consistent with the City's Long Range Plan, Envision Franklin.

And, as she and others on staff point out, there's the issue of the floodplain and proposed manipulation of it from the applicants.

"The plan shows 53 acres of floodplain being manipulated for the allowance of 332 units, or 70 percent of the 471 units proposed," Diaz-Barriga said.

"I have to go back to Envision Franklin and remind everyone that Envision Franklin says 'conservation subdivision.' Staff has been very clear with the applicant all along that we do not support it because of what Envision Franklin says.

"That stance is not new. It is also not new that we do not recommend this because of the multifamily unit that they'll place on the property because multifamily units are not supported in the 'conservation subdivision' concept in Envision Franklin." X

On flooding concerns, Dorie Bolz, president and CEO of the Harpeth Conservancy, has been front and center on the development of the Brownland Farm project. As the Harpeth River flows through the property, she has consistently raised a red flag against the plan.

"The proposed development is in a uniquely challenging bend in the Harpeth River because the high density residential development proposal will be surrounded by floodwaters," Bolz said in an email.

"There is a minimum of 1 to 4 feet of floodwaters that inundate all the ways in and out of this area of the Harpeth that affects the type of development that is most suitable in this bend in the Harpeth."

Church members, residents have their say



Part of the sale of the property would come from Christ Community Church, which sits just north of Brownland on Hillsboro Road. The church outgrew its original location in downtown Franklin, and moved to its current campus 20 years ago. Don Davis, business administrator for the church, said a vote among members was 2 to 1 in favor of the project.

“Our motivation is really to be able to partner with the city and with the developer to shape and influence the beautification projects, such as the parks and trails and greenspace, the community garden, the shared interest. We think the developer has been very open-minded to our concerns, and we think that what they have created together for the city will really be a beautiful addition.”

In the Monticello neighborhood, which is east of Hillsboro Road and across the way from Brownland Farm, the board of the home owners association supports the project as well, according to Owen Jones, co-president of the HOA.

But Michael Smith, also a resident of Monticello, pointed out a petition with more than 2,600 signatures against the development had been submitted to City Hall.

“This development proposal requires significant floodplain alterations that conflict with the guidelines of Envision Franklin,” Smith said at the meeting. “This alteration may increase the availability of land on which to build, but it does not address the flood impact of surrounding areas, and there are a lot of communities involved that will be impacted.”



The deferral of the resolution of the planned development until the board’s October meeting was requested because of a late concern about the flood height of Hillsboro Road at the Mack Hatch Parkway bridge. Paul Holzen, engineering director for the city, said staff needs additional time to address the issue. The Oct. 12 meeting will also include another public hearing.

Visit the [city of Franklin’s Facebook page](#) to view the whole board meeting from Tuesday night.

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