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Brownland Farm residential development plan sunk by unanimous vote from Franklin aldermen



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The Brownland Farm residential development in Franklin appears to be dead in the water three years after it was first announced.

Franklin's Board of Mayor and Aldermen unanimously rejected a rezoning request for the controversial development Tuesday night following a two-hour public hearing. As a result, residential development there cannot move forward.

The vote marked an end to a prolonged debate surrounding the project. Since it was first announced, the development has been the subject of public protests, community meetings, fierce online debate and several resubmittals to the City of Franklin for approval.

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“This thing has drug on for way too long for projects that come to the City of Franklin,” Franklin Mayor Ken Moore said ahead of the vote. “I’m concerned that, if we approve this project, we’re going to have a whole flood of similar projects with a lot of floodplain manipulation.”

Here's what to know about Brownland Farm.

What is Brownland Farm?

Brownland Farm is a 233-acre property located at 1155 Hillsboro Road in Franklin. The Anderton family, which still owns the property, founded a farm there in 1963. In 2001, it became the home of the Music Country Grand Prix horse show.

In 2019, owners Robin and Michelle Anderton announced their intent to begin a residential development there. Early designs would have brought 485 residential units to the property.

Why was it controversial?

The project has long been bogged down by community backlash, especially from residents who live in nearby neighborhoods. Some brought up concerns that are common to any new development, saying that the addition of new houses would chip away at Franklin's small-town character by increasing density, congesting major roads and overwhelming local schools.

As the debate continued, many opponents — some of whom lived through the severe flooding event in Franklin in 2010 — coalesced around safety concerns since the site lies along a floodplain near the Harpeth River. Groups including the Harpeth River Conservancy argued that a 100-year flood would inundate Hillsboro Road with up to 2.25 feet of water and cut residents off from emergency services. A 100-year flood is a flood that has a 1% chance of happening in a year.

Brownland Farm: *Development future unclear as Franklin Planning Commission recommends no to residential use*

"This is the fundamental flaw of this plan that's been there since the beginning: Do we have a way out when it's a 100-year flood for people who live here?" Harpeth River Conservancy President and CEO Dorie Bolze asked at an April planning commission meeting discussing the development. "Let's think about something else here that doesn't put so many people in harm's way."

The development team, headed by Kevin Estes of Land Solutions Company, said they would mitigate flooding concerns by altering the floodplain in the area. The team commissioned a flood study from Barge Design Solutions, which they said proved that the land could be safely developed as a residential area.

City planning staff still recommended the Board not approve a rezoning request for the property, saying the development as proposed would not align with the goals of Envision Franklin, the city's comprehensive land-use plan adopted in 2017.

What happened Tuesday?

The Brownland Farm site is zoned for agricultural use in keeping with its previous use as a farm and a horse show venue. Franklin's Board of Mayor and Aldermen voted Tuesday on a rezoning request, which would have cleared the way for redevelopment.

Several development opponents picketed in Franklin's city square ahead of the vote, holding signs with slogans like, "Stop more flooding / Tell BOMA vote no Brownland," and, "Turn around don't drown."

At least 47 residents spoke at a public hearing ahead of the vote. Around 35 of those speakers opposed the development. Sixteen speakers supported the development, including at least four members of the development team and the husband-and-wife owners of the Brownland Farm property, Robin and Michelle Anderton.

What now?

Alderman Patrick Baggett said he hopes to see Brownland Farm developed in some way, if not as a residential development. Several city officials, as well as many project opponents, similarly said they would be open to nonresidential development at the site.

"You do have the right to sell your property. Everybody does," Planning Commissioner Marcia Allen said at a March planning commission meeting addressing the residential plan. "I do think that it can be developed in a way that will fit Envision Franklin. I just don't think that this is the way."

Developer Kevin Estes told the Tennessean ahead of the meeting that his team would "most likely" pursue a nonresidential development plan if the rezoning request failed.

"If it's not us, someone will be back to do something on that property. They've decided to move the horse shows," Estes said. "The property, located 1.6 miles from the circle? It's not going to lay still, I'll say that."

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