

Do we want 'our' eagles?

By Jeb Barzen, Ferry Bluff Eagle Council

Our community's unique identity is defined in large part by the Wisconsin River and our significant population of wintering eagles. The decisions made and the values expressed by the Prairie du Sac Village Board following the August 22 public hearing regarding the proposed Nonn Development imply that development along the river is more important than our unique natural resources. In addition, several mischaracterizations were made at this meeting regarding the Ferry Bluff Eagle Council (FBEC) that must be corrected.

Mr. Ken Nonn has proposed to construct two, 3.5-story condominium buildings, and a two-story restaurant in the region located between Graff Park and Eagle View Dental, close to Eagle Island. The Prairie du Sac Plan Commission asked FBEC to assess the potential impact this proposal might have on eagles and asked FBEC to work with Mr. Nonn to find a way that the development could move forward without harming eagles. This request came in May and FBEC submitted to the public record a 17-page biological assessment on June 2, based on 18 years of research on local wintering eagles. FBEC concluded that the development, as proposed, did have a significant chance of impacting the winter eagle population.

Following the June 5 Plan Commission meeting, however, we felt that our assessment was not understood by the Plan Commission so we submitted a letter (June 25) asking what the Plan Commission wanted FBEC to do. Though part of the public record, this letter was never answered nor directly addressed in subsequent public meetings by the Plan Commission. With other downtown developments pending and more to come, the questions raised are still quite relevant.

During July, FBEC members discussed possible ways to decrease the impact of the development on eagles with Mr. Nonn. Though the meetings were productive, they were not conclusive and FBEC listed our concerns and suggestions in writing to the Prairie du Sac Plan Commission on August 7. In response the Plan Commission recommended approval (in a 4-2 vote) of the Nonn development Planned Unit Development proposal to the Prairie du Sac Village Board without directly responding to concerns that FBEC had raised. Citing personal observations, most Plan Commission members stated they did not feel the development would impact eagles, but failed to critique any of the data that FBEC provided.

On August 22, FBEC re-iterated our concerns about the Nonn development to the Village Board and stated that the proposed development violates the Sauk Prairie Comprehensive Plan. Even so, FBEC stated that it was willing to work with all involved to solve some of the remaining issues and asked for a 120-day delay in the vote so that problems could be worked out and a better dialogue established. Board members declined to delay with little explanation. Without asking FBEC, one board member commented that he couldn't imagine anything productive being accomplished in 120 days. FBEC had hoped to use the delay to test (with wild eagles being rehabilitated) if tinted windows could really decrease visual disturbances from residents inside the building. If tinted windows work, the impact of the building could be significantly reduced. If tinted windows fail, irreparable disturbance to eagles could result.

Village Board members also stated that plans for re-development of the proposed area were at least ten years old. Why raise objections now? The planning document created ten years ago includes a variety of commercial or residential developments that are allowed for this area, many of which would not cause any increased disturbance to eagles. Relatively little disturbance, for example, has resulted from the current use of the site. FBEC worked closely

with the Sauk Prairie Comprehensive Plan Committee (and its precursors) and argued that, though many types of development would be compatible with this site, some would not. Each proposed project would have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, which is what FBEC has done here.

At the public hearing, FBEC was accused of back-stabbing, changing our data throughout the process, and of being inconsistent. It is the prerogative of the Plan Commission, Village Board, and Mr. Nonn to feel that they have received poor or inconsistent information. In a public forum, however, they must substantiate their concerns. None has been offered. In contrast, FBEC has expressed our views in writing, on the public record, June 2, June 25, August 7, and August 22. Communication is a two-way street. Though we can control what we say, we cannot control what people hear.

The clarification of these issues is not just a rancorous display of public disagreement. The issues involved are important to our entire community, as is the decision-making process itself. The wintering eagle resource could be significantly impacted if we make poor decisions now. 'Our' eagles are a resource shared by five local governments and 45,000 annual visitors, as well as by Mr. Nonn, the Prairie du Sac Plan Commission, the Village Board, FBEC members, and local residents.

How do you view the situation? Voice your opinions to members of the Village Board. Encourage them to create a more open process that allows for better assessment of options and direct dialogue on the issues of concern. Examine the documents that are part of the public record to see what you think. These documents are available from the Prairie du Sac Village office, the FBEC website (<http://www.ferrybluffeaglecouncil.org/research/currentmgmt.htm>), or FBEC president Kay Roherty at 643-2417. This is our community and it will be what we make it to be. Inform yourself and stay engaged in shaping the future of your community.