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FEATURED

Planned recycling drop-off point in The Plains raises concerns

By Kayla Beard Jun 24, 2018



Bins similar to the city-owned bins pictured in this file photo will be present at the new recycling drop-off location in The Plains.

David DeWitt

While a plan to establish a recycling drop-off location at a community park in The Plains has prompted concerns from some community members, the Athens Township Trustees, who voted to approve the plan, say their goal is to improve the community overall.

On June 4, the Trustees voted to enter into a land-use agreement with the Athens Hocking Solid Waste District, according to board vice chair Steve Pierson, who described details of the plan last Wednesday.

Currently, no permanent facilities for recycling or waste disposal are available in The Plains on a daily basis, Pierson said. The analysis of this issue began with the Community Improvement Challenge Program initiated last spring by the Athens County Commissioners. Designed to “promote civic involvement and community enhancement,” it resulted in the formation of committees for areas outside of Athens and Nelsonville, which included the “unincorporated Census-designated place known as The Plains,” Pierson explained.

“One of the challenges identified (by the committee) was the lack of facilities for disposal of solid waste in public places and public access to recycling opportunities,” Pierson said. Though he was able to obtain several trash cans from the city of Athens “that were previously located on Court Street prior to the installation of solar-powered trash compactors,” and place them at several locations, he said, the lack of public access to recycling has remained a concern.

Athens Township Trustee Eddie Smith noted that The Plains is the only community in Athens County that doesn’t have a public recycling drop-off center. “If you combine that fact with the fact that” The Plains is a U.S. Census-designated LMI (low- and moderate-income) community, “you have a real problem,” Smith said.

Only 25 percent of residents in The Plains have access to curbside recycling, Smith said. “Some providers just do not offer recycling. Another aspect of that is some residents just can’t afford recycling,” Smith said, adding that it’s cheaper to just pay for trash collection alone.

By comparison, 57 percent of the population in Athens County has access to curbside recycling pick-up, and 61 percent have access to community drop-off areas, Pierson noted. Meanwhile, zero percent of the population of Athens Township (outside of Athens city) has access to a drop-off facility, and the closest one located on Sand Ridge Road near Chauncey is being disbanded due to a lease termination with the Athens County Commissioners, Pierson explained.

“If we want to provide some sort of recycling,” Smith said, “...we’ve got to have some sort of public drop-off point.”

After considering several locations for such a drop-off spot during improvement committee discussions, Pierson said, “it became obvious that there were limited locations... where a drop-off area might be established.” As some options that have been discussed, Pierson listed the Plains Shopping Plaza on North Plains Road, Athens High School on Johnson Road, the Plains Volunteer Fire Department on Connett Road and the Plains Community Park on Connett Road.

“The Athens Township Trustees could only make the Plains Volunteer Fire Department property or the Plains Community Park available; all of the other locations were controlled by private owners or the school board,” he said.

Initially, Pierson contacted Bruce Underwood, executive director of the Athens-Hocking Recycling Center, to see what types of containers were available and what costs might be involved. The first location considered was the Volunteer Fire Department property, with the container placement proposed at the corner of First Street and Fire Department Lane, Pierson said, but the containers and service would come at a cost. The Trustees have no funding available to pay the monthly fee, Pierson said.

Last November, Pierson contacted Roger Bail, operations coordinator of the Athens Hocking Solid Waste District (AHSWD), to inquire about containers and potential costs. "AHSWD has 24 community drop-off locations in Athens and Hocking Counties but none in Athens Township," Pierson said.

In early 2018, the AHSWD Board of Directors proposed an agreement to the Athens Township Trustees to develop a recycling drop-off area at The Plains Community Park, according to Pierson.

The AHSWD board "earmarked \$14,500 to construct a 75' x 75' concrete pad to accommodate several recycling containers with additional funding to be available in the future to improve the site," Pierson said. Some of the base material would be recycled glass instead of stone, and the area would be fenced, landscaped and created at a distance from the existing park accommodations "so as not to interfere with any of those activities."

The Trustees would not have to invest any money into the project under the agreement, "and the potential to use the paved area at local events such as the Plains Indian Mound Festival was seen as a plus," Pierson said.

SOME RESIDENTS, AFTER HEARING about the new plan, have expressed concerns over some "social costs" of a drop-off location in the park, according to the Trustees. When the AHSWD met on-site with representatives of the Township Trustees on June 14, Pierson said they "were met by neighbors expressing opposition to the project based upon perceived nuisance." They cited insect and vermin infestation, accumulation of trash, availability to residents at multiple hours, environmental contamination, diminished property value and community park degradation.

"Those may be very legitimate concerns," Smith acknowledged, "but the challenge for the Trustees at the end of the day is we have to look at the value and the benefit that we're going to provide the 70 percent" of residents who don't have access to recycling.

Cleaning up The Plains and the "best net benefit" for the community are the chief decision-making factors for the Trustees, according to Smith. "If we're not providing recycling access to the 70 percent of residents who don't have it," that comes with its own environmental cost, he said.

Pierson noted that "no opposition or concerns were expressed at eight Community Improvement Committee meetings held over the last 16 months or at any meeting of the Athens Township Trustees." He added that all of the Trustees' meetings are open to the public,

and that the plan has been discussed at several recent meetings, as well as two meetings of the Plains Community Improvement Committee this year and six of those meetings last year, all of them public.

“Since June 14, the development of the area has been put on hold until all concerns may be addressed,” Pierson said, adding that he thinks it would be “foolish” to immediately engage the 180-day “escape clause” in the agreement. “All concerns could be investigated/addressed, alternatives explored and participating agreement partners made aware of implied action or litigation if the project would proceed,” he said.

Smith said that if people have any other ideas on how to solve the recycling problem, “I think the board would be open to that idea.” The next Athens Township Trustees meeting will be held this Tuesday at 5:30 p.m. at 313 W. Union St. in Athens.