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## Milton industrial park plan draws big crowd, big questions

By Neil Johnson

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MILTON—Angela Jeter warned the Milton City Council Thursday night that lights from a large industrial development proposed west of Milton would obliterate people's view of the stars in the night sky.

“We're not going to be able to look at the stars,” Jeter said. “It may be selfish, but I feel like there are some areas that need to be left.”

It was an unusual comment from the nearly 100 residents who have been turning out en masse at a half-dozen recent public meetings during which landowner Bill Watson has pitched a sweeping concept to annex 1,500 acres of his own farmland into Milton and turn it into an industrial park. Watson says the plan would bring thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in additional tax base to the area.

Residents have been waiting for a chance to say something, anything, about Watson's plans, which some say are as grandiose as they are vague. Watson has had a platform to speak at public meetings, but until Thursday the public had not been given a chance to sound off on those plans. Officials have said that's because they haven't had enough information on Watson's plans, or a hard proposal to warrant such talks.

Thursday night, the Milton City Council let residents speak about Watson's plans at a special meeting. About a dozen people spoke Thursday, while the council, and nearly 100 residents of the towns of Milton and Fulton and the city of Milton listened.

Milton Mayor Brett Frazier said he hoped the city would hear questions from the public to add to its list of queries as it eyes potential annexation of Watson's land, which is west of Milton along the County M/Interstate 90/30 corridor.

Watson, who was not in attendance Thursday, has not filed a petition for annexation or filed paperwork for zoning changes for his proposal.

The city got questions along with jeers from town residents who live near land in Watson's plan, and are opposed to the development. Those residents say they oppose a plan they say could obliterate farmland and change the landscape of rural Milton forever.

“We moved out there 35 years ago to get away from Milwaukee. “Not to be in it, (again),” resident Sue Chwala, who lives off Highway 51 near Watson's proposed development, said.

A question that residents raised over and over Thursday is one that has floated around for weeks: the specter of whether Watson intends to develop gravel pits on the land.

Milton Mayor Brett Frazier told residents that he wouldn't want the city to annex any land that could potentially be used for gravel pits, because it wouldn't fit the city's development plans, and it creates a “liability.” But he said the city would not have control over zoning if part of Watson's land was developed outside the city's jurisdiction.

Fulton town board member Andy Walton urged the council to get an agreement from Watson that he wouldn't dig gravel pits.

Others asked about an increase in train and truck traffic that a large industrial development could bring.

Former Milton mayor Tom Chesmore took shots at Watson's plans, saying a development “wouldn't be worth a nickel” if increased truck traffic near schools along Madison Avenue led to a child being injured or killed.

Chesmore said he already gets hemmed in by train traffic near his Milton residence. An industrial park could only bring more trains, he said.

“Unless you plan a (railroad) bridge, I'm going to fight this thing tooth and nail,” he said.

Other residents cautioned the city to move slowly to learn what Watson's plans are. One man pointed out that large business parks the scope of Watson's seem to develop over time spans of 10 years, particularly ones that involve such Interstate interchanges as the one Watson says he wants at County M and I-90/39.

Some residents wondered why there is a need for so much land for development when Rock County has about 600 acres of shovel-ready industrial land available.

Rural Edgerton resident Jodi Trepasso urged the city to think critically before annexing acreage that would double the city's footprint, especially without knowing specifics of Watson's plans.

“Do you want one man or one owner owning half the city of Milton?” she said.

Resident Bill Chwala asked the city for transparency in all its dealings with Watson moving forward. He said the city owes that to residents whose lives would be changed by such a large project.

This is the biggest thing in my opinion that the city of Milton in my 35 years here has heard,” Chwala said. “Doggone it, the public has the right to know about it. All of it.”

Resident Dave Gilbertson of rural Edgerton said he's aware of at least one area disposal company that would like to expand operations. He wondered if Watson was thinking about digging a landfill. He warned a summer wind could blow a garbage odor straight across the towns and into Milton.

Frazier said that idea was new to him, but he wasn't surprised to hear it, considering Watson won't rule out that the area might be mined for gravel some day. He also hasn't showed specific project plans.

The city council told residents over and over they still didn't have enough information from Watson to answer a lot of their questions.

Frazier told The Gazette the lack of information from Watson and still more questions from residents troubles him.

“I’m frustrated tonight,” Frazier said. “More and more I’m getting concerned that it (Watson’s plan) is not developing into specifics and a concreteness that I’d have expected at this point.”