

WILLIAMS BAY— There are over 100 pages of comments on the Village of Williams Bay website. Three separate social media accounts carrying questions with various responses. Adjoining property owners supporting while another suggests a different concept entirely. All being shot like arrows towards one target: The Preserve Concept.

The current plan being proposed to the Village of Williams Bay by Aurora University (Owner) Topography Hospitality LLC (Applicant) for what was known as George Williams College.

As of Nov 22, there are 32 letters in support of the plan with 15 against posted on the Village's website.

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(Will send you Topography Final GDP of 11/6/24—to see if there is any pics you can use)

Aurora University, in its letter to the Village Board, of Nov 4 gave a quick background on the decision to sell and their prospective buyer vetting process.

It was important the chosen buyer be, “a steward of this historic property, who will not only honor the rich history of the campus but also have the resources necessary to maintain and elevate its legacy for generations to come.”

Aurora notes how it engaged a boutique firm in Fall, 2022, “rather than engaging a traditional real estate broker who had extensive experience in the education and not-for profit area.” This firm contacted over 150 entities from higher education, not-for-profit, healthcare, local organizations and other businesses that were geographically or strategically relevant to the property.” Only 11 parties expressed interest due to the “unique characteristics of the property, including its size, zoning limitations, and significant upkeep costs.”

“Of the 11, only two were well-resourced higher education organizations who although extremely interested, were unable to develop sustainable business plans. All other parties declined to present the university with a bid to purchase the property,” explains Aurora University.

“Except for one,” Topography Hospitality, LLC

Topography checked off all of Aurora's boxes:

- They could sustain the property
- Be good citizens to the community at large
- Continuation of the Music by the Lake program
- Low density development
- Respected and preservation
- Add to the overall richness and character of Williams Bay

Liam Krehbiel, Founder & CEO of Topography Hospitality LLC agreed to be interviewed for this article. As part of the interview, he was asked why he spent 30 years in Non-For-Profit sector.

“Growing up,” explained Krehbiel, “my parents always said ‘with every opportunity comes a responsibility.’ Thanks to them, I’m deeply passionate about supporting communities and helping people who are less fortunate. I’ve spent the majority of my career in the nonprofit sector. Before starting Topography, I founded an organization called A Better Chicago, which provides funding and technical assistance to nonprofits that support low-income youth. While Topography is a company, my commitment to helping people and communities hasn’t changed. We plan to support Williams Bay by offering well-paying jobs with benefits, supporting local businesses and nonprofits, and protecting the natural environment.”

When asked why he expanded the original 90-acre nature preserve, retreat center, small inn, and amphitheater; to now include additional amenities like a racquet center and swimming pool, he states:

“We have refined our plan based on additional research and feedback from a range of stakeholders. That said, our vision remains the same—to create a 90-acre nature preserve; a retreat center and amphitheater; and a small country inn. Our vision for the property has remained consistent. That said, with any project, there will be refinements along the way. For example, our original plan included two tennis courts, which already exist. Based on the feedback we received, we learned that we needed to have more racquet courts, and to offer different types of racquet sports. So, we decided to move our racquets program to a new location and increase the number and type of courts we offer. Even with this change, we are still committed to creating a 90-acre nature preserve.”

Topography and Krehbiel are now starting to jump into the land use/zoning issues referred to in Aurora University’s Nov 4 letter with a Public Hearing scheduled on Dec 9 at 7 pm at the Williams Bay High School regarding proposed Comprehensive Plan Amendments.

The Village adopted the revised Comprehensive Plan in April 2023. Between 2020 and 2021, three applications to amend the comprehensive plan were filed with all, but one, in the vicinity of the proposed Preserve Concept.

Village Planner, Sonja Kruesel, ’s memo to the Village dated Jan 15 notes the future land use for Aurora’s lake shore campus is institutional campus and if a different use were proposed, a Comprehensive Plan amendment would be required.

“The Future Land Use designation for the former George Williams College campus is ‘Institutional Campus,” she explains, “The Institutional Campus land use category was developed and mapped specifically to preserve large, long-held institutional uses like

George Williams College and Yerkes Observatory. If a different land use was proposed, it would most likely require a Comprehensive Plan amendment in addition to potential rezoning.”

The Jan 15 memo also notes, “The Future Land Use designation for the former Golf Course parcel is ‘Planned Neighborhood.’ Planned Neighborhood was recommended as the future land use in this area primarily due to proximity to the Williams Bay schools.”

Per the memo, those portions of the golf course outside of existing Village boundaries would require annexation and zoning that is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

By letter dated April 25, Topography asked the Village for guidance on amending the comprehensive plan.

There was a Special Planning Commission meeting on May 13. The Commission reviewed the Comprehensive Plan Amendment process, the planner’s memo noted above, staff comments and comprehensive plan amendment process.

The Planning Commission recommended 1) a comprehensive plan text amendment revising “Institutional Campus” to “Institutional Campus & Limited Resort” and 2) amending the future land use map for the golf course within the Village limits from “Planned Neighborhood” to “Institutional Campus & Limited Resort.”

The Public Participation Plan (PPP) required as part of the Comprehensive Plan Amendment process requires at least one formal public hearing on the proposed comprehensive plan amendments as well as opportunities for comments/responses on Draft Comprehensive Plan Amendments.

There are as of Nov. 21 a total of 8 letters specifically opposing amending the comprehensive plan.

Anne Drake, Women’s Leadership Center, neighbor to the proposed Preserve, “does not oppose the project,” per Jennifer Nix, EVP, Marketing Communications & Strategy at Lincoln Road, “but opposes amending the comprehensive plan.” Instead, suggests Drake in her October comments to the Village Board, a “Williams Bay Cultural Center” be considered. Five other individuals agree with Ms. Drake’s concept, including, Harold Friestad, former chairman of the Kishwauketoe Nature Center.

When attempting to reach out to Ms. Drake for clarification as to how she suggests the Village implement her concept, Ms. Nix, replied on behalf of Ms. Drake reiterating Ms. Drake opposition to amending the comprehensive plan.

So too does Susan Franzen, Innkeeper and Owner of Bailey House Bed & Breakfast.

“I’m not opposed to the project,” states Ms. Franzen, “But I am opposed to the Village amending the comprehensive plan.”

Ms. Franzen went on to explain her reason for opposition was that the concept was inconsistent with the Comprehensive Plan’s vision for the community. The vision, she points out, is to ensure, “The community culture will be that of a **retreat from the more intense lifestyles of resort areas**, enhancing leisure, opportunity for spiritual renewal, outdoor recreation, and contact with nature. Businesses, employment centers, and community services will be those which respond to the specific needs of residents and visitors and sustain the vitality of the community as a whole.”

Aurora University (Owner)/Topography Hospitality LLC (Applicant) also filed an application for a Zoning Map Amendment to create a Planned Development Overlay (PDO) on tax parcels presently all zoned Public & Institutional Zoning within the Village limits:

WWUP00011 – 57.59 acres—Lake Shore Campus(32.99 acres) & Golf Course East of Lake Shore Drive

WGT 00010—Small parcel portion of parking on Lakeshore Campus

WGT 00009-Small easement on roadway on Lakeshore Campus

WA499800002-Small easement on roadway on Lakeshore Campus

The present Public & Institutional Zoning conditionally permits large developments and lake shore recreation. In order to further specify and restrict zoning uses, a planned development overlay (PDOs) are commonly used in Wisconsin. Overlays create a zoning designation that allows developers to propose a project with a unique mix of land uses and building densities, often with more flexibility than standard zoning rules by applying an additional layer of regulations ("overlay") on top of the existing base zoning district.

The Village already created overlay districts for: the Village Center Design Overlay (VCO), Shoreland Wetland Overlay (SWO), Floodway Overlay (FWO), Flood-Fringe Overlay (FFO), General Floodplain Overlay (GFO), Environmental Conservation Overlay (EC), Planned Development Overlay (PDO).

An EC Overlay is already in place over a portion of the existing Public & Institutional (P&I) zones of Aurora/Topography (West of Constance and all of the Women’s Leadership Center property.

Village Administrator David Lothspeich explains, “The WLC (Women’s Leadership Center) property and the former GWC (George Williams College) property both have environmental corridor overlay. Village Planner Sonja Kruesel and Village Zoning Administrator Bonnie Schaeffer (both copied) are aware and will be including as part of their reviews. My understanding is that both the WLC and The Preserve development plans impact the environmental corridor overlay below the allowed threshold which I believe is a maximum

percentage. In summary, the Village and The Preserve are aware of this limitation and will be addressing as part of the public review process.”

The Public Hearing on this PDO overlay zoning amendment originally scheduled for Dec 9 IS CANCELLED.

Aurora University/George Williams Campus lands also lie in the Town of Walworth:

2000019 -38.38 acres along Highway 67 (corner of North Lake Shore Drive & Theater Road) and EW 200020 -40 acres in Town of Walworth (West of North Lake Shore Drive along curve).

The original Public Hearing Notice for Dec 9 states the Planning Commission was going to consider the EW 200020 zoning, but per Lothspeich on Nov. 21 when asked about status stated, “The annexation process was originally scheduled for earlier this month was deferred by Chair Duncan as the annexation is dependent upon the requested Comp Plan amendments. The Plan Commission did not consider the annexation and will only be considering at some point in the future if the Comp Plan Amendments are approved. Similarly, the annexation will need to be approved before the zoning and PDO can be considered by the Plan Commission.”

EW 2000019, the 38.38 acres along Highway 67 is not part of any public hearing notice at this time.