

## Unanimous vote nixes mall tax break

### Tax

Greece school board cites fiscal responsibility in board's decision

**Meaghan M. McDermott** Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

Citing the need to be fiscally responsible to taxpayers, the Greece Central School District Board of Education on Tuesday unanimously voted down a proposal to give a hefty tax break to The Mall at Greece Ridge. ■ “As a school board member, I do not believe taxpayers should bail out private companies,” said board member Michael Valicenti.

Mall owners Wilmorite Management Group had asked the board to consider a tax break package that would have seen the property's payment-in-lieu-of-taxes to the schools reduced by an annual \$620,000 over the next 10 years. Company officials said the money would be used to help pay for renovations to the dated Regal Greece Ridge Stadium 12 theater, as well as help Wilmorite draw new and retain existing tenants in the mall's interior.

Dennis Wilmot, Wilmorite's senior vice president of leasing and development, argued his company's case before the board in July, noting national headwinds affecting the retail mall business. In July, mall anchor tenant Sears closed its Greece Ridge location, and there are concerns that troubled retailer JC Penney could shutter at least one of its three area locations.

“The amendment to the PILOT will provide us the resources to keep Greece Ridge Center (the mall) a vibrant and sustainable retail complex in a very challenging economic environment,” Wilmot said in July.

In an email Wednesday afternoon, Wilmot said that while the vote was a setback, the underlying need for changes to the PILOT still exist.

“We respectfully disagree that the school district would not receive a ‘return on its investment’ by agreeing to the modification,” he said. “The benefits of this assistance will be far more profound in the long term by stabilizing and growing commercial property tax values along the Ridge.

“The alternative may ultimately cost the district considerably more than what has been requested.”

School board President Sean McCabe said he thought Wilmorite failed to provide enough solid information proving that the tax break was necessary. He said the board had numerous additional questions following the July presentation and Wil-

See TAX, Page **9A**

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The main sign at The Mall at Greece Ridge. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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See TAX, Page 9A



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Continued from Page 1A

Wilmorite was not forthcoming with answers.

“That solidified our vote,” he said.

Other board members said they were gravely concerned about shorting the school district’s budget by as much as \$6.2 million over 10 years.

“This is not sound fiscal policy,” said Sherita Traywick. “We are in the business of educating children.”

In his statement, Wilmot said the company intends to continue talking with the school district. town and county in hopes that a compromise can be reached.

“If there’s one thing we all agree upon, it’s the importance of keeping the mall and West Ridge retail corridor prosperous for many years to come,” he said.

This was not the first time Greece schools have taken a hard line against a Wilmorite request for tax relief. While a payment-in-lieu-of-taxes package for the mall was granted by the county’s economic development arm Imagine Monroe back in 2012, the school board refused to sign on until it negotiated more favorable terms. Under that plan, which froze the assessed value of the mall and associated parcels at \$91 million over 25 years, the school portion of the PILOT increases at 2 percent annually, compared with .06 percent annually for the county and town.

Wilmorite’s request would have modified that agreement.

Without an agreement from the school board, Imagine Monroe will not consider any changes to the mall’s existing PILOT, said Monroe County spokesman Jesse Sleezer.

According to Imagine Monroe documents during the fiscal year ending Dec. 31, 2017, Wilmorite made PILOT payments of \$721,467 to the county, \$588,408 to the town of Greece and \$2,344,686 to the school district.

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