Amberley Green: Strategic Partnership Outreach and Financial Considerations

Follow-Up to the Amberley Green 2026 Future Visioning Report

Purpose and Background

One of the recommendations in Kathleen Norris' *Amberley Green 2026 Future Visioning Report* was to pursue strategic partnerships. This recommendation recognized the fiscal constraints under which Amberley Village operates and the possibility that partnerships could help advance the outcomes most desired by residents through the public engagement process.

In August, I reported that Chris Fritsch, Zoning and Project Administrator, and I had met with representatives of the following organizations to explore potential partnership opportunities related to Amberley Green:

1. Cardinal Land Conservancy
2. Hillside Trust
3. Great Parks of Hamilton County
4. Jewish Federation of Cincinnati and the Jewish Community Center (JCC)
5. The Mayerson Group
6. Civic Garden Center
7. Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens
8. NVR, Inc.
9. FC Cincinnati
10. Cincinnati Nature Center
11. Will Grimmer and Towne Properties

The purpose of these discussions was to determine whether any of these organizations might have the interest, resources, or expertise to help shape the future of Amberley Green. The objective was not to advance a predetermined use of the property, but to explore opportunities that could respond to residents' priorities while recognizing the Village's financial limitations.

To date, no organization has committed to funding a comprehensive plan or the capital improvements necessary to achieve the community's most desired outcomes. Some organizations identified opportunities to provide educational programming, volunteer support, or limited activities. Others explored potential real estate interests but did not establish a partnership that would resolve the Village's significant financial challenges.

The following summarizes the discussions and the results of the outreach.

Organizations and Meeting Outcomes

Cardinal Land Conservancy

Cardinal Land Conservancy is a nonprofit land conservancy serving the region. Its mission is to preserve natural habitats, waterways, agricultural lands, and open space. The organization protects and restores natural lands, including habitats that support native wildlife and scenic vistas for public enjoyment.

Cardinal Land Conservancy acquires conservation interests, including conservation easements and long-term deed restrictions, which it monitors and stewards in perpetuity. Establishing a conservation easement on portions of Amberley Green would require the Village to address the costs associated with the conservancy's ongoing monitoring and stewardship responsibilities.

Outcome: Although conservation may be consistent with some of the community's priorities, a conservation easement would not necessarily eliminate the financial obligations associated with the property. Depending on the structure of any conservation easement, the Village could be responsible for costs associated with Cardinal's ongoing monitoring and stewardship of the land. The Village would need to evaluate the costs and long-term implications of such an arrangement before proceeding.

Hillside Trust

Hillside Trust works with local governments and private landowners on land-use issues involving the region's hillsides. Its mission is advanced through research and education, land conservation, and advocacy for responsible land use. Similar to Cardinal Land Conservancy, Hillside Trust uses deeds and easements to protect land, with approximately 1,400 acres under its protection, primarily to preserve hillsides.

Hillside Trust's perspective was that the Village's ownership of Amberley Green already provides a substantial measure of land protection. Maintaining public ownership and control of the property is an important means of preserving its open-space character.

Outcome: The discussion reinforced the value of the Village retaining control of Amberley Green. However, the meeting did not identify a financial partnership that would provide the resources needed to implement the improvements residents have requested. Any formal arrangement involving Hillside Trust's ongoing protection or stewardship of the property would need to address the associated costs and responsibilities.

Great Parks of Hamilton County

Great Parks of Hamilton County has been a regional leader in conservation, trail development, and nature-based experiences since 1930. It protects more than 18,000 acres of open space and provides trails, waterways, educational programs, and recreational opportunities. Great Parks is a

political subdivision of the State of Ohio governed by a Board of Park Commissioners appointed by the Hamilton County Probate Court Judge.

Approximately 68% of Great Parks' revenues come from voter-approved levies and intergovernmental receipts. The organization also relies on user fees, grants, and donations.

Great Parks follows a Comprehensive Master Plan to establish priorities for its properties and future investments. Its focus is generally on land donations and properties connected to existing parks. During our discussion, Great Parks noted that Amberley Village is not underserved by park space, given the presence of Amberley Green and French Park.

The Village asked whether Amberley Green might be considered as part of Great Parks' plans. Great Parks was already familiar with the property and had previously discussed it. The opportunity was subsequently reviewed with its leadership team and Board.

Outcome: Great Parks informed me last month that because of its current master plan priorities and forecasted capital project funding through 2031, it could not partner with the Village on Amberley Green. This response confirms that even an organization with substantial conservation and park-management experience has competing priorities and limited capital available for new opportunities.

Jewish Federation of Cincinnati and Jewish Community Center (JCC)

After years of discussions dating back to 2016, when the Village first granted the Jewish Community Center permission to explore summer day camp options on Amberley Green, the Jewish Community Center and Jewish Federation have decided not to pursue locating a day camp at Amberley Green.

The organizations said community concerns, both within and outside the Jewish community, along with the urgency of meeting growing needs, guided their decision. Instead, they expressed interest in exploring opportunities to expand their existing campus in Amberley Village.

Outcome: The organizations will not pursue a day camp at Amberley Green. Their interest in expanding their existing campus is a separate opportunity and does not provide a partnership to improve or develop Amberley Green.

The Mayerson Group

The Mayerson Group is a Cincinnati-based real estate development, investment, and property management firm. The company had previously expressed interest in Amberley Green and proposed creating public spaces in exchange for multifamily residential uses.

Its concept involved developing a portion of the property through a master-planning process, potentially incorporating apartments, assisted living, and condominiums, and possibly the JCC's summer camp with memoranda of understanding defining the responsibilities and terms associated with each proposed use.

Outcome: The Mayerson Group's interest represents a potential real estate development approach with some recreational aspects but less emphasis on conservation. Any such proposal would require careful consideration of the proposed land uses, the amount and quality of public space provided, financial terms, infrastructure requirements, and consistency with community priorities. No agreement or commitment has been established.

Civic Garden Center

The Civic Garden Center, located at 2715 Reading Road in Cincinnati, is a regionally recognized nonprofit organization that teaches people how to grow food and care for the environment. It provides resources related to gardening, sustainability, and horticulture.

The organization was already familiar with Amberley Green and has hosted various sessions on the property. Although it maintains another location, the Civic Garden Center indicated that it does not have the capacity to assume responsibility for Amberley Green.

Its volunteers would, however, welcome opportunities to support educational programming related to community gardens, market gardens, and horticulture.

Outcome: The Civic Garden Center may be a resource for specific programs and volunteer-supported activities. Its interest does not extend to managing the property or funding the capital improvements needed to support broader community use.

Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens

Founded in the late 1800s on 65 acres in Cincinnati, the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens has since expanded its facilities and acquired additional properties and conservation areas. Its work focuses on animal conservation, wildlife population health, and improving public understanding and acceptance of wildlife in local communities and landscapes. Its funding comes from a combination of local taxpayer support, philanthropic gifts, donations, and user fees.

The Village was particularly interested in the Zoo's satellite property along Mason Montgomery Road, which encompasses approximately 600 acres and supports sustainability and conservation activities. These include native plant programs, wetland restoration, a cheetah run area, and solar and sheep farming. The Zoo also develops conservation strategies involving native flora and educates the public about issues such as invasive species.

The Zoo indicated that its volunteers and expertise could complement activities at Amberley Green, particularly through programs promoting pollinators, native plants, and conservation education.

Outcome: The Zoo may be able to contribute educational programming and expertise related to native plants and pollinators. The discussion did not identify a capital investment or a commitment to manage or develop Amberley Green.

NVR, Inc.

NVR, Inc. operates in two business segments: homebuilding and mortgage banking. Its homebuilding operations construct and sell homes under the Ryan Homes brand. The company expressed interest in Amberley Green on its own initiative.

NVR's interest has been in purchasing raw land, after which a developer would be identified for various uses on the property.

Outcome: NVR's interest is primarily in acquiring land rather than establishing a partnership to preserve and improve Amberley Green as a public asset. Any proposal involving a sale of property would require a separate evaluation of the potential public benefits, proposed uses, financial terms, and consistency with Council's direction and community priorities. No transaction or commitment has been established.

FC Cincinnati

FC Cincinnati operates the region's professional soccer franchise and also has development interests in areas surrounding TQL Stadium and beyond. The organization maintains a men's player practice area with soccer fields in Milford and has been exploring an indoor practice facility for its women's players.

FC Cincinnati indicated an interest in Amberley Village. However, the Amberley Green site could not accommodate the type of commercial development that would likely be needed to support the proposed player practice facility.

Outcome: The type of facility FC Cincinnati was seeking does not appear to be a viable fit for Amberley Green. The discussion did not result in a partnership opportunity for the property.

Cincinnati Nature Center

The Cincinnati Nature Center is a nonprofit organization that provides nature-based experiences across approximately 1,800 acres at its Rowe Woods and Long Branch Farm locations in Clermont County. Through research, education, and conservation, it works to protect land and wildlife while educating visitors, members, and neighboring communities.

The Nature Center's strengths include programming, volunteers, and educational activities. Its funding comes from memberships, private sources, and endowment resources.

Although the Nature Center was not actively seeking a physical presence closer to Cincinnati, it indicated that Amberley Green could be suitable for summer camps, garden tours, and educational programming. The organization noted that the property might eventually fit within its master plan, but its current capital campaign is focused on building a new volunteer center near its Milford and Goshen locations.

Outcome: The Cincinnati Nature Center may offer future opportunities for nature education, tours, camps, and volunteer-supported activities. Its current capital priorities do not include investing in Amberley Green, and no financial or management partnership has been established.

Will Grimmer/Towne Properties

Will Grimmer, a golf professional, is interested in his concept for an indoor and outdoor elite golf training facility at Amberley Green. Grimmer has worked with Adam Bortz of Towne Properties on the concept. Grimmer was originally seeking approximately 10-15 acres for a facility that would include indoor hitting bays, chipping and putting greens, a gym, and health and wellness amenities such as recovery booths. The site requirement increased to approximately 20 acres to accommodate the proposed facility and would operate through private memberships and include an outdoor practice area. The building was anticipated to require a height of up to 30-50 feet, with approximately 10 employees.

The discussion also included the possibility of complementary uses near the golf academy such as pickleball, residential development, park space, or light commercial uses. Towne Properties generated a preliminary concept plan that could address resident interests, including a summer camp. In addition, a small office/headquarters building could bring additional employees to the site.

Outcome: The golf academy/preliminary concept plan represents a potential private-sector development opportunity that could bring a specialized recreational facility and associated uses to Amberley Green. However, the proposal's land requirement, building height, and potential complementary uses would need to be evaluated against the property's overall vision, community priorities, and applicable land-use considerations. No final development plan, partnership agreement, or financial commitment has been established.

Financial Considerations: The Gap Between Community Aspirations and Available Resources

The strategic partnership recommendation must be understood in the context of the Village's financial responsibilities. Amberley Green is a significant community asset, but ownership of approximately 130 acres does not translate into the financial resources necessary to provide the amenities and improvements residents may desire. The Village's primary contribution to any potential partnership is the land itself. What the Village does not have is the capital necessary to independently transform that property into the community asset envisioned by residents.

The Village funds essential municipal services, public safety, infrastructure, and routine operations. Those obligations compete directly with any discretionary investment in Amberley Green. Under the Village's current financial constraints, independently funding substantial improvements to the property would require difficult choices among existing municipal priorities or the identification of additional revenue and outside funding sources.

To better understand the financial implications of addressing some of the basic needs identified by residents during the public engagement process, the Village asked our Village Engineer, Verdantas, to prepare very preliminary, high-level cost estimates for the following improvements:

1.	Resurfacing the entire existing asphalt lot	$1,061,565
2.	Widen and reconstruct the entire trail system	2,841,698
3.	Relocate the entrance to Amberley Green	415,638
4.	Construct restroom/shelter building	2,480,665
		$6,799,566

Other improvements have been mentioned, so staff has estimated costs based on similar projects which illustrate the scale of the financial challenge:

1.	Playground	$500,000
2.	Tree cutting, stump removal, and chipping of downed trees	400,000
3.	Repairing the tennis courts	80,000
4.	Repairing the driveway to the garden parking lot	40,000
5.	Reestablishing water and sewer taps	30,000
6.	Restoring the tennis shed, including electricity	15,000
7.	Pond maintenance	25,000
		$1,090,000

Total preliminary estimated costs: $7,889,566

These figures are preliminary estimates intended to illustrate the magnitude of potential expenditures, not a final project budget. They may not include all planning, design, engineering, permitting, infrastructure, contingency, or ongoing operating and maintenance costs that could be required. This is a substantial financial commitment for the Village, particularly when the figures do not necessarily represent a comprehensive plan for all potential improvements at Amberley Green.

These estimates demonstrate why the strategic partnership recommendation was important. The challenge is not simply determining which improvements residents would like to see. It is identifying a financially responsible way to accomplish those improvements without compromising the Village's ability to meet its other obligations.

The Village's principal contribution to a potential partnership is the property itself. The approximately 130 acres offer opportunities for open-space preservation, nature-based activities, education, recreation, and potentially other uses consistent with community priorities. However, the land is an asset, not a source of readily available capital. Making it more useful to residents may require substantial investment, and the Village cannot assume that the costs of development, restoration, or long-term maintenance can be absorbed by its existing budget.

The outreach conducted to date has not identified an organization prepared to provide the capital investment needed to deliver the community's most desired outcomes. Some organizations may

be able to contribute programming, volunteers, or specialized expertise, but those contributions do not eliminate the need to fund physical improvements, infrastructure, and continuing maintenance. Other organizations have expressed development interests that would require careful evaluation against the public's priorities and the Village's long-term interests.

Conclusion and Next Steps for the Future of Amberley Green

The Village's outreach to potential strategic partners has been extensive, but it has not produced a partnership that provides a clear and financially feasible path forward for Amberley Green. These discussions have nevertheless been worthwhile in helping us better understand the opportunities and limitations associated with the property. These discussions may also create opportunities for future partnerships as organizational priorities and circumstances change.

I believe the next step should be to move from a broad search for partners toward a more clearly defined vision for the property's future. Before investing additional time in pursuing potential partners, Village Council should determine what it wants Amberley Green to contribute to the community over the next 20 years and establish the criteria by which future proposals will be evaluated.

I would also encourage Council to consider Amberley Green within the broader context of the Village's long-term future. It was a visionary purchase, made with the expectation that its potential would ultimately benefit the community. To date, however, that potential has not been fully realized. The decisions made regarding this property, 2100 Section Road (former Gibson site), and other significant assets should reflect a shared understanding of the community's priorities, economic development opportunities, and financial responsibilities.

The Village's ongoing efforts to strengthen its financial position provide an important foundation for addressing these questions. However, improved finances alone will not determine the best use of our properties. That will require a clear vision, disciplined evaluation of alternatives, and a willingness to balance community aspirations with financial realities. Another option may be to maintain the property's current condition, recognizing that the Village is not financially positioned to make the reinvestment necessary to improve it. However, maintaining the status quo is also a decision, and it comes with consequences for the property's long-term condition and the community's expectations.

Going forward, any proposal for Amberley Green should be evaluated not only for its potential community benefits, but also for its funding sources, initial capital requirements, long-term operating costs, maintenance obligations, and consistency with the priorities established by Village Council. Potential partnerships should be considered where they offer a realistic means of advancing those priorities while protecting the Village's financial stability and retaining appropriate public oversight of the property.

Amberley Green remains an important community asset, but its future cannot be determined by community aspirations alone. It must also be guided by financial reality. The outreach

documented in this report represents an important step in understanding the opportunities and limitations before the Village. The challenge ahead is to identify a financially sustainable path for Amberley Green, one that reflects the community's priorities while recognizing the financial realities facing the Village.

Respectfully submitted,

Scot F. Lahrmer
Village Manager
Amberley Village

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