

Hopatcong Housing Fight: 'Con Job' vs. Ratable Godsend

By Rod Allee
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To Jeff Tittel, head of the Sierra Club in New Jersey, a huge housing development in the hills of Hopatcong would be a "con job" blessed by borough officials. To Mayor Richard Hodson, the project would bring a blessed gift of property tax revenue without much of an increase in service costs.

The tussle is illustrative of the larger fight over the future of the Highlands region.

A developer has brought conceptual plans to Hopatcong for 820 units, named "Village Grande" and restricted to people 55 and older. The development would be along Brooklyn/Stanhope Road on the western edge of Hopatcong, just outside that borough's designated Town Center.

The property is sloped and rocky, and Hodson said he doesn't know if the developer will be able to persuade the various town boards that it would be environmentally safe. "No, we don't know that yet," said Hodson last week in his office in Borough Hall.

"But I say this - they should have the chance to make their case. If they do, it will be good for Hopatcong. They project adding to our ratables \$3.3 million for our schools, \$1 million for the county, and a net of less than \$1 million for the borough. The main number is \$3.3 million for our schools, all without adding a single student."

Tax ratables, in short, are what Hodson and lots of other town officials in the Highlands crave. For the most part, their towns are without industry and malls, meaning the property tax burden is carried mostly by homeowners.

Tittel and lots of other conservationists, however, see such developments as degrading the only semi-wild belt left in North Jersey, the craggy hills and marshy bottoms and swift streams that make up the Highlands. That area supplies the runoff that fills reservoirs serving millions of state residents.

A Town Center designation from the state is meant to condense development into small areas of the Highlands, leaving alone the countryside. Such a designation has benefits to the towns, enabling them to shepherd developments through with fewer paperwork bottlenecks, and putting them on the list for state aid to put down an infrastructure, including sewer and water pipes.

The fact that Village Grande would be outside Hopatcong's Town Center incenses Tittel. "When Hopatcong came to the state for a Town Center designation, they made a contract," Tittel said last week. "The contract was not to allow high-density development outside the center. That is the whole idea, a growth boundary. This undermines the State Plan. It is OK to make an agreement, then change?"

Hodson was victorious Friday when it was announced that Governor McGreevey's "Highlands Preservation Area" - inside of which construction is to be severely limited - skirted the 294 acres on which Village Grande would be built.

The developer, Hopatcong Adult LLC, is to formally present preliminary plans Tuesday night to the borough planning board.

However, Tittel is far from finished.

He said that if Hopatcong gets serious about allowing the Village Grande development, he would direct the Sierra Club's lawyers to file an appeal with the state seeking to decertify Hopatcong's Town Center designation.

"If it is a fight, I'll try to pull their Town Center designation," Tittel said. "We've got four such appeals already, in Vernon, Sparta, Sandyston, and Montague. These towns are playing a con game, and they are not going to get away with it."

Tittel pointed out that the Village Grande land is close to Lubbers Run, which the state has given its highest designation as a wild trout stream. He said the Village Grande developer would not be allowed to build a small sewage plant and then discharge into Lubbers Run.

"If the town approves the zoning change," Tittel said, "the developer has reasonable expectation he will get sewer and water hookups. It is a con game - since there won't be any discharge into Lubbers Run, they'll get into the Musconetcong Sewerage Authority plant. What does that do? It takes away capacity from others in town. They can't have smart growth with dumb centers."

Hodson is just as angry as Tittel: "I hear friends from outside say that north of Route 80 and west of Route 15 is New Jersey's Outback for their use, without any thought to the people who live here," he said. "This is why I get incensed. For Tittel, it is either 'my way or the highway.' That's an environmental bully. He forgets I was the mayor when this borough started an environmental commission."