

## Highlands Proposal May Stall Hopatcong Housing Plan

By Lynn Olanoff  
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Evolving state growth regulations may impede a proposed 844-unit senior housing development off Sparta-Stanhope Road in Hopatcong.

Borough officials are working to lessen any state opposition to the plans, which they support, by seeking an extension of their town center designation. A State Planning Commission-approved extension may better the borough's chances of having the area designated for development under the pending preservation plan for the Highlands, a region which includes all of Hopatcong, said borough officials.

"If we include it (the senior development) in our town center, it may be easier to exclude it from the Highlands," said Borough Council President Laurie Spaziani. "It would be one more ball in our court."

Borough officials also sent a letter to Gov. James E. McGreevey to request that the 294 acres proposed for the senior housing development are not included in the preservation plan for the Highlands, said Borough Administrator Steven Ward. State officials are expected to publicize the areas in the Highlands they want to preserve this spring.

Borough officials say they support the proposed development, known as the Village Grande at Hopatcong, because it will provide a clean and much-needed ratable. They estimated the 1,400 residents the development would bring to the borough would add some service costs, but no education costs.

"It is a positive tax ratable because it will be an age-restricted community — there will be no impact on the local school system," Ward said.

While there has been no formal analysis, Ward said the development would "certainly stabilize taxes."

Officials anticipate the development would bring about \$5.3 million in new taxes, which would be about an 18 percent increase over the borough's current \$29 million tax base.

"It's a big boost for the school, because obviously they (residents) are still paying taxes," Spaziani said. "We really need ratables. It's really hard to get business because no one really travels through Hopatcong."

The borough's engineer and planner are reviewing the development's plans to ensure they are environmentally responsible, though initial reviews indicate they are, Ward said. The applicant, Hopatcong Adult LLC, of Freehold, headed by David Meiskin of Windsor Management, submitted a plan in 2001 for 1,800 units on 450 acres. After taking the Borough Council's suggestion to scale down the plan, Meiskin's current plan, which includes 155 acres of open space, is seen as favorable by the borough, Ward said.

"This is a number closer to where we want to be," he said.

Meiskin submitted the revised plan Jan. 9 to the borough. The plan is expected to be heard by the Borough Planning Board this spring, said Board Secretary Eugenia Wiss.

The development would include 420 single-family homes, 232 "manor homes" or garden apartments and 192 townhouses for people 55 and older, according to the application. Construction is expected to be completed in five stages.

Much of the wooded area, near Sparta-Stanhope Road just to the northeast of Lenape Valley High School, includes rocky terrain and steep slopes, with some freshwater wetlands and a tributary to Lubbers Run. Plans include private on-site sewer and water supply systems. The area is zoned for multi-purpose use.

Meiskin and Project Engineer James Biegen did not return calls for comment.

The proposed development is just west of the borough's town center designation, which includes essentially all the borough's developed land. Officials hope the proximity to the town center will help the extension receive approval, Ward said. In the interest of keeping open space in the borough, officials also will seek to preserve land near Bear Pond that is currently part of the town center, he said.

A spokesman for the State Department of Community Affairs, which includes the State Planning Commission, said the town center amendment process can take a number of months, and will be held up even more by the pending preservation plan for the Highlands.

"The State Planning Commission, like all state agencies, has been asked to postpone any decisions relative to projects potentially within the core of the Highlands until the legislation governing the Highlands is passed into law," said spokesman E.J. Miranda.

Deputy County Administrator John Eskilson, a member of the State Planning Commission, said he is unsure how state regulations would impact the senior housing development plans because the relationship between the planning commission and a proposed Highlands governing body has yet to be defined.