

Residents question development's impact

By LYNN OLANOFF
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HOPATCONG - The developers of a proposed 734-unit senior-housing development in the borough faced strong public opposition at a borough Planning Board meeting Tuesday.

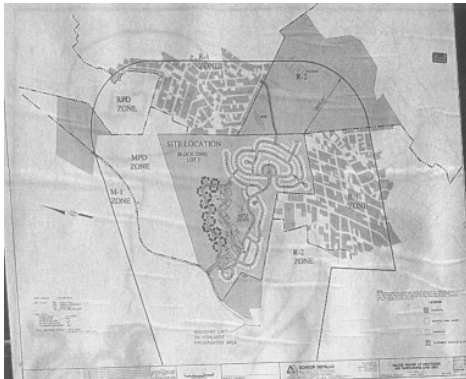
Many in the 300-person crowd were hostile toward the applicant and board, yelling criticisms from the back of the high school auditorium and alleging favoritism from borough officials on the project.

About 10 public members addressed the board and the planner for the applicant, DR Horton, Inc., of Freehold, during the three-and-a-half-hour meeting. Most of them brought copies of the borough's land use code and master plan, which they used to question the proposal's legality and appropriateness. The planner, Doug Kimball, said most of the questions, which addressed the proposal's undetermined sewer plan and environmental impacts, would be bettered answered by the project engineer, who is scheduled to appear at the borough's next Planning Board meeting on Oct. 19.



The board did not come to any decision on the project Tuesday, and a decision is not expected for months. Board officials described the process as thorough and intensive.

"The proposal may collapse under its own weight," said Mayor Richard Hodson, who is a member of the board, during a meeting break. He said the board will likely favor a reduced number of units from the applicant and has requested to see the plans drawn with fewer units so the public can see a more probable option.



The proposed development on Sparta-Stanhope Road near the Stanhope and Byram borders has already been scaled down about 110 units from an 844-unit application filed with the borough in March. The proposed 734 units on 294 acres will include single-family homes, garden apartments and townhomes and would be marketed to people age 55 and older. Sale prices will start at \$250,000.

A number of borough officials have voiced support for the project since its proposal, citing \$5.3 million in new taxes for the borough with no additional education costs. Many residents and environmentalists have demonstrated opposition to the project. A citizens' group ? Hopatcong's Organization to Preserve our Environment, or H.O.P.E. ? has formed against the development.

Some residents at the meeting questioned whether the proposal fits with the borough's master plan, which values the environment and forbids growth on steep slopes. With a plan which calls for disturbance of 86 acres with steep slopes, Kimball said the applicant will need to seek a variance.

Kimball, however, called the proposal environmentally sound because it allows for preservation of 93 acres, which includes a stream known as Lubbers Run and connects to land preserved under the Highlands act across the street. In all, the development includes 167 acres of open space.

"It will be better protected and preserved than it was in the past," Kimball said. "It's not reasonable to expect this property will not be developed at some point."

Kimball said it would be possible to build the units without disturbing so many steep slopes, but that would not fit with the borough's preference for clustered housing buffered by open space. Most of the steep slopes are in the property's center, and building around them would decrease the buffers, he said.

"The public good is promoted by this design, more than the alternative," Kimball said.

Building on the steep slopes was a major point of objection for many of the public speakers. Planning Board member Martin Janowski raised the concern, as well.

"How are you physically going to destroy the steep slopes?" he asked Kimball. "Many species of wildlife live on steep slopes."

Vernon resident Dennis Miranda, a Sierra Club member and the only non-Hopatcong resident to speak, also questioned Kimball about the area's wildlife, which he said included red-shouldered hawks, barn owls and wood turtles ? all endangered species.



Kimball acknowledged these species were in the project's environmental report, but said he was not the best person to answer questions about them.

Two borough residents upset by problems with their drying wells and the borough's installation of sewers raised concerns about the project's water and sewer plans. The applicant will not be able to use the borough's sewer system and water and will have to seek those resources elsewhere, Hodson said.

"Isn't water one of the first things a planner should look into?" asked resident Olive Freud.

Other residents raised issue with Hodson's request to the state Association of Counties that the proposed development site be exempt from the adjacent Highlands preservation area. In a March letter read by resident Brad Stehle, Hodson wrote that the borough has been trying to develop the area for some time.