

# Hopatcong planners seek bigger venue as meeting overflows

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FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Hopatcong planning board officials were forced to adjourn a hearing last night on a revised housing development application when a crowd of 120 people, mostly opponents, spilled out of the meeting room.

Chairman Scott Wallis said the planning

board would reschedule the hearing for Sept. 14 at the high school or another larger venue. The meeting room can legally accommodate 86.

Planner Duggan Kimball, representing developer D.R. Horton of Freehold, had just begun testifying on the 305-acre Gallo estate project when people complained that they could not hear the proceedings.

The board acknowledged that people were standing in the hallway, out of sight and sound of the proceedings, and took a moment to confer on what should be done. Meanwhile, two volunteer firefighters in uniform talked to Wallis and apparently noted that the crowd exceeded the room's legal capacity.

Residents said other meetings on the ap-

plication had been held at the high school and suggested that the board schedule the meeting there or at the civic center.

The 3-year-old application for the property off Sparta-Stanhope Road has been scaled down to 735 housing units from the 820 proposed earlier this year. But the

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smaller number has not dampened the opposition.

A month ago, two protest groups were formed: HOPE (Hopatcong Organization to Preserve our Environment), led by Rick LaIacoma, and CCH (Concerned Citizens of Hopatcong), chaired by Michael Nowell.

"He's from the Heights. I'm from the Hills," said Nowell, referring to residential sections in the borough.

Both men maintain that the development violates zoning ordi-

nances that put limitations on how much steep slopes can be disturbed and require that the local environment be protected. The land is mostly wooded and 45 percent is wetlands, said Nowell.

Both groups also are upset that Mayor Richard Hodson, who serves on the planning board, requested in a March 16 letter to the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions that the Gallo property be excluded from the Highlands Act, recent state legislation to protect the Highlands from development.

Before he stopped testifying, Kimball noted the plan was not located in the Highlands but adja-

cent to it. Nearly 168 acres will not be developed, he added.

Peter B. Lijoi, a Horton representative, said the new proposal includes 388 single-family homes, 234 garden apartments and 112 townhouses, all for buyers 55 years of age or older. In order to provide water for the units, Lijoi said his group would dig for wells "just like the municipality allows" and would build its own sewage treatment plant unless other arrangements could be found.

"There's no plan for water or sewage," countered LaIacoma. "We don't want our wells affected. What will be done for us if our wells go dry?"

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