

Byram plan aims at larger lot sizes

Officials to discuss scheme for growth

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Minus its proposed village center, Byram is among six towns that are entirely in the preserved region of the Highlands, meaning development will be especially tough to get approved.

And people in town say that's fine with them.

Tonight the Byram Planning Board will discuss and possibly vote on a new master plan that expands lot sizes, preserves pristine land and encourages small pockets of commerce to dissuade strip malls and large department stores from moving into town.

The public hearing begins at 8 p.m. in township hall.

"If we sat here with a conventional approach to development, we'd find ourselves in a town that many of us wouldn't recognize anymore, in a town that just sort of assumes development is coming (and) there's nothing we can do about that in New Jersey," said Margaret McGarrity, who sits on the local environmental commission and open space committee.

"We have so much difficult land and natural limitations in place," McGarrity, who worked on the master plan, said about the rocky terrain in Byram.

The 148-page master plan, which was funded through an \$80,000 grant from the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions, expands the size of residential lots for subdivisions and introduces new zoning methods to maximize open space, said Scott Olsen, a resident who worked on the plan.

For example, 5-acre zones would become 10-acre zones and 3½-acre zones would change to 5-acre zones throughout much of Byram, meaning property owners who plan to subdivide residential lots must allocate more space to each home.

The plan also calls for lot density averaging, which means a developer can place homes in one subdivision on different sized lots. Presently, developers in Byram have to allocate uniform lots to each home in a subdivision. If the master plan is approved, one house could sit on 20 acres, one house could be on 10 acres, and another eight homes could sit on two or three acres each, to save as much land as possible, Olsen said.

"You can kind of tweak the sizes of the lots to fit the lay of the land and use the land appropriately, preserve the acres that are sensitive and still get the same yield of property," he said.

This type of zoning is catching on in other suburban and rural corners of the state, such as sections of Somerset County, where towns have land-use constraints, Olsen said.

The plan also calls for cluster zoning, which requires that developers pack homes in one corner of a parcel and preserve the rest of the land.

Though developers typically
[See **BYRAM**, Page 63]

BYRAM

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 61

Plan aims at larger lots

would not appreciate Byram's proposals for land use, the building constraints of being in one of the Highlands' most environmentally sensitive regions leave them with little wiggle room already, Olsen said.

The plan also shuns large commercial development by inviting

small strips of convenience stores and professional offices in each of Byram's six distinct neighborhoods.

"What this does is kind of give each individual community its own sense of place," Olsen said. "We're designating small parcels. It's not like someone could come in and build a 7-Eleven or a Quick Check. It might actually encourage the more mom-and-pop kind of places."

Part of the vision for Byram is the proposed village center, an enclosed community of homes, busi-

nesses and open space that officials hope will unite the separate neighborhoods and give the geographically segregated town a more distinct identity.

"We made a lot of strong changes," said Councilman Lou Esposito, who worked on the plan. "We'll be able to help control some of the urban sprawl that we see in some of our neighboring towns. We'll closely align ourselves to the Highlands legislation."

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