

2 concerns raised on Hopatcong housing proposal

BY SALLY GOLDENBERG
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Foes of a proposed housing complex in Hopatcong hope two new hurdles will stop the building.

An independent environmental report criticizes the 662-home development proposed for a 305-acre tract off Sparta-Stanhope Road, calling it a hazard to wetlands and wildlife. Also, the builder may have a tough time acquiring the necessary sewer capacity.

But the developer, DR Horton Inc., downplayed the report's findings, insisting the age-restricted project will move forward.

"We're playing by the rules," said Peter Lijoi, vice president of land acquisition for DR Horton. "This piece of property is not in the preservation area (of the Highlands), and it is zoned for age-restricted housing. We should be able to develop it."

Councilman John Armeno, who serves on the planning board, said borough officials requested the report at the developer's expense. The board wanted an independent firm to review the environmental, financial and traffic impacts of the plan, he said.

Wander Ecological Consultants of Newton said the project would require removing more

than 100,000 truckloads of soil and rock.

"This very extensive impact from clearing, grading and soil removal is the overarching environmental impact from this project, whose effects extend to many other areas of concern, including air and water quality, noise, traffic, wildlife, vegetation, aquifer recharge, aesthetics and public health, safety and well-being," the report states.

DR Horton first came before the Hopatcong Planning Board last spring with the plans. Lijoi says Hopatcong's need for tax revenue and New Jersey's need for age-restricted housing

[See **DEVELOP**, Page 28]

DEVELOP

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

Environmental, sewer issues raised

make a perfect marriage. But hundreds of residents have opposed the project at meetings, on Web sites and with lawn signs.

Mayor Richard Hodson, who persuaded the state to remove the land from the Highlands preservation area, could not be reached for comment yesterday. Hodson also serves on the planning board.

The 35-page report takes issue with DR Horton's own environmental study that defends the project.

"I was happy that (Wander) did an honest and, I think, very accurate report, compared to the builders," said Mike Nowell, a Hopatcong resident who has been leading the fight against the development. When he read the report, "I was waving my fist going, 'Yes, I knew this all along, and I wanted to see it in print.'"

Lijoi shrugged off the findings, saying the firm provided a biased report after hearing objections by residents.

"It was drafted in response to the anti-development group," he said.

"I don't give it much credence. We have our environmental consultants preparing a response to it," he said.

In the meantime, DR Horton faces a potential obstacle in obtaining sewer capacity from the Musconetcong Sewage Authority.

"They asked us if we would be willing to sell them 100,000 gallons," said Stanhope Mayor Diana Kuncken. "We sent them a letter of intent saying that we were willing to enter into negotiations for the possible sale. Nothing further has transpired."

But the four founding members of the authority — Netcong, Mount Olive, Roxbury and Stanhope — all have to agree on the transfer of sewer capacity. Netcong and Roxbury want some of that capacity for their needs.

In addition, the parcel planned for the project does not qualify for sewers yet.

"My other solution is to build a sewer plant, either on site or on another site," Lijoi said. "That can be solved."

Nowell hopes the report and the sewage issue will ruin the project's chances.

"Odds are they're not going to be able to get the sewage. This report is damaging," Nowell said. "I think it's just far too environmentally sensitive, and I think that's what's going to win the whole thing."