

Land use

Traffic study underway in Torch River; township officials soon to decide on RV park proposal

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This clearcut site near Torch Lake in Milton Township's unincorporated Torch River village is where a proposed luxury RV park may be built, should Milton Township planning commissioners approve a pending site plan and special use permit application.

Record-Eagle/Andrew Rosenthal



TORCH RIVER — Consultants will be busy in coming days counting cars, people, trailers, bicycles — basically all human movement — at a notoriously hectic intersection on the south end of Torch Lake.

The research is the second phase to a traffic study ordered by the Milton Township Planning Commission; the public body is expected to soon make a final decision on a site plan application and special use permit for the proposed Torch River RV Park first submitted 18 months ago after the traffic study is done.

The project riled the neighbors and spurred some to voice their objections to township officials during months of public meetings. Some hired environmental consultants and lawyers to fight the development of an 80-site luxury campground up a hillside near Torch Lake.

Among the objectors is Terry Roote, a neighbor who said his lawn was ruined during two major rain events last year when clay and silt eroded from the clear-cut land at the center of the community's hubbub.

"It was a disaster and they know it," he said this week.

Roote said he entered mediation with the developers, and hired an environmental attorney to assist with what he said amounts to upward of \$150,000 in damages to his property and landscaping.

Traverse City-based lawyer Andy Blodgett represents the developer, but did not return a telephone call seeking comment on the situation.

Blodgett did, however, speak during last week's township planning commission meeting when he argued the second phase of the traffic study was a waste of time and money, and unfair to his client. The first phase resulted in a recommendation not to pursue a second, he underscored.

Nevertheless, township officials insisted the second part be completed to offer them more depth of knowledge before their coming decision on the pending site plan and special use permit application for the RV park.

Joe Merillat, planning commission secretary, served as chairman of a subcommittee to investigate the proposal. Commissioners in January reconvened a public hearing for the RV park's application that first began in July last year in a township park.

Instead of a decision, they formed the subcommittee to look into concerns expressed by the hundreds of people who repeatedly showed up to express their opposition over the course of the multiple gatherings.

Merillat last week said the second part of the traffic study will help officials better understand expected impacts of the proposed RV park, possibly even offering recommendations about whether the development would cause the intersection to "not function properly."

The intersection at issue is where Cherry Avenue meets with Torch River Road from the south and Southwest Torch Lake Drive from the north, then crosses over the Torch River into Kalkaska County. There's already a marine business there, along with a party store and a state boat launch in sight of the lake's famed sandbar which annually lures boaters and bathers from across the Midwest.

John Iacoangeli, of engineering firm Beckett & Raeder, said the first part of the traffic study looked at expected additional trips the park would cause during morning and afternoon peak travel times. He said the next part of the traffic study will produce a report card that rates the level of service the complex intersection provides: observing pedestrians, golf carts, roadside parking and all types of vehicles that pass through the area.

The consultant said the traffic counts will be done during a seven- to 10-day period prior to the Independence Day holiday weekend. A final report may be completed in time for next month's township planning commission meeting, Iacoangeli said.

The project developers are landowner Jim Brewer and business partner John Peal, owner of Torch River Marine situated on Cherry Avenue. Brewer spoke in objection to the second phase of the traffic study during the June 15 planning commission session, and urged officials to call a vote on the site plan and special use permit.

Bill Hefferan, planning commission chairman, said he agrees a decision must soon be made on the RV park proposal.

“We need to vote on this. Everybody deserves finality,” he said this week.

Hefferan said the planning commission may gather for a special meeting to complete the adjourned public hearing, review the traffic study report and consider the application, should the work not be completed by the regular July 13 meeting.

“We will rely on the experts to tell us. That’s what the residents wanted,” he said. “Everybody is anxious for a decision to be made.”

The planning commissioners can deny the application, approve it, or approve it with conditions, Hefferan said.

Meanwhile, Antrim County Soil Erosion Officer Heidi Shaffer confirmed the clear-cut site led to erosion problems during heavy rain events last year, and she since OK’d a soil erosion permit to allow work to prevent future washouts.

“They wanted to stabilize the hill, and I am thrilled that they wanted to stabilize that hill,” she said, adding the goal of the approved work is to prevent erosion from leaving the site.

Shaffer said the RV park’s design includes multiple green infrastructure elements to minimize stormwater runoff into the nearby river with strategically placed infiltration basins. Despite the RV park being designed up a hillside, she said it can be engineered to not harm the environment.

“With enough money any site can work,” Shaffer said.

However, the soil erosion officer said she understands the concerns and complaints of the proposed RV park’s neighbors.

“I sure as heck wouldn’t want the silly thing in my backyard either,” Shaffer said.

At least one person logged on to observe last week’s videoconference planning commission meeting questioned whether the ongoing work is masquerading as erosion remediation but is instead part of RV park build-out. A man signed in as Mac Whitehouse said he worries the site will lose all remaining trees from the 10-acre site that has already largely been clear-cut.

He wasn’t the sole participant to voice concerns.

“This is going to change life in the Torch River area forever,” said Susan Kelly of Rapid City.

Roote added to the chorus, but with safety concerns associated with the number of people the RV park would add to the already frenetic intersection in summertime.

“This is just a recipe for somebody to get killed. These people come stumbling back drunk from a day on the lake,” he said.