

Hearing

Critics swarm Torch River RV Park public hearing

Permit tabled amid outdoor, evening meeting because of mosquitoes

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1 of 7



Kellie Wells asks a question during Tuesday's Milton Township public meeting for a special use permit for the Torch River RV Park at the Milton Township Park.

Record-Eagle photos/Jan-Michael Stump



KEWADIN — Mosquitoes pressed the pause button on a controversial proposed RV park along the Torch River.

Milton Township officials voted unanimously Tuesday night to table a special use permit request for an 80-site recreational vehicle park at the end of a three-hour meeting, after the sun was long gone and mosquitoes were swarming.

That means the pandemic-era public hearing at a public park will continue, picking up exactly where officials left off.

Part No. 2 of that hearing has not yet been scheduled.

Meanwhile, about 120 people showed up to Tuesday's public hearing — nearly all properly wearing face masks and seated physically distanced around the covered pavilion at the baseball and soccer fields on Indian Road in Antrim County's Milton Township.

It was clear most in attendance were opposed to officials granting the RV park's permit request.

"I'm struggling to understand what advantage this development will provide to Milton Township residents," said Dennis Fitzpatrick, a nearby Torch Lake Drive resident.

More details about the proposed RV park came to light during the outdoors hearing.

Property owner Jim Brewer said the park will have a gated entrance and the sites will be rented out to a single customer for the entire season, May to October. There will be a couple of bathroom buildings and two open-air gazebos with bonfire pits, the only places where campfires will be allowed in the park, he said.

Renter's can't sublet their site to other visitors and at least one adult member of the renting family must accompany any visitors, Brewer said.

Ten people by day and six overnight would be allowed at each park site, he said, along with two vehicles.

Brewer said it would be more economically advantageous to have the sites rented for short-term periods, but opted instead to do seasonal rentals because of traffic congestion considerations.

“We put a lot of work, a lot of thought in this,” he said.

But a midnight quiet time five nights a week and a 2 a.m. quiet hour on Friday and Saturday nights not only shocked the crowd, but seemingly also Brewer’s business partner, John Peal, who owns Torch River Marina across the street.

“It’s not going to be a party place,” Brewer said, followed by widespread incredulous laughter from the crowd.

Peal asked where those quiet times came from if he is meant to be the on-site rules enforcer and Brewer said 2 a.m. is when local bars let out. Someone in the crowd shouted out to ask why Peal didn’t know what his business partner had proposed, only to be met with a testy response.

“I was out of the country for four months, smart ass,” Peal sniped back.

Peal spoke to the crowd and said anytime anyone tries to do something commercial on Torch Lake the effort is unjustly met with resistance. He further said the 80-site RV park should be considered better than the 37 new homes initially planned for the site.

“People come up here and enjoy themselves and buy a house here. That’s what happens,” Peal said. “It doesn’t matter if you like it or don’t like it. It’s an allowable usage.”

He said a waiting list for the RV park already has 63 sites spoken for.

However, others in the crowd remained unconvinced and questioned why more scientific studies into expected impacts from the RV park have not been required.

Kevin Celarek, a seasonal neighborhood resident, said he cannot fathom why township officials have not insisted on both environmental impact and traffic studies, as well as noise and lighting restrictions written into the permit.

Adjacent property owner Kellie Wells said while much of the 10-acre planned park is surrounded by up to seven acres of forested screening, the Miller Road side isn't. She said the planned park will be too big, with too many sites and will require the loss of too many trees.

"I'm here to tell you I'm opposed to this happening to the green belt," Wells said.

Sue Kelly of Clearwater Township said she lives directly across the Torch River from the marina and she, too, is concerned about impacts on the community from the proposed RV park — including the nearby adjacent Kankaska County township in which she resides full time.

"Noise doesn't stop at the village zoning limit," she said, explaining the marina already generates noise into the early morning hours during summer.

"This is simply going to exacerbate that," Kelly said.

But not everyone at the public hearing was opposed to the project.

Joyce Grammer of Elk Tip Drive said she complimented the landowners for trying to bring such a nice amenity to the area. The RV park will allow people who can't afford to outright own land along the waterfront to have access, she argued — pointing out many of the opposed neighbors are wealthy seasonal residents.

"We have been flooded by you people," Grammer said, explaining she's lived up north her entire life.

The hearing continued until well after dark.

In fact, both township officials and hearing attendees were visibly fighting mosquitoes by the time public comments finished and Milton Township Planning Commission Secretary Joe Merillat had read a couple of written comments into the official record. He said it was only the beginning of the stack of letters.

Chantal Lefebvre, planning commission vice-chairperson, said she'd had enough by about 10:10 p.m., suggesting the conversation should be paused and picked back up at another meeting.

Bill Hefferan, chairman, said he was OK with that so long as the matter doesn't wait until the next regularly scheduled meeting. The second part of the public hearing should continue as soon as it can be scheduled, he insisted.