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BREAKING TOP STORY

BERNARDS TOWNSHIP COMMITTEE (VIDEO) Quarry plan facing 'termination' vote in Bernards Township

By W. JACOB PERRY Staff Writer Jan 9, 2018



Residents protest against plans to build at the Millington Quarry in the parking lot of the Bernards Township municipa
Photo by Charlie Zavalick

BERNARDS TWP. – A decision on whether to kill a controversial plan to redevelop the Millington Quarry is expected to go to a Township Committee vote at a special meeting later this month.

Mayor John Carpenter announced at the Township Committee meeting Tuesday night, Jan. 9, that the special meeting will be held at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 24, at the Ridge High School Performing Arts Center (PAC) on South Finley Avenue.

The committee plans to discuss a resolution to “terminate redevelopment efforts at Millington Quarry,” Carpenter told an audience of about 45 people, many of whom sat with opposition signs they had carried at a protest outside town hall only an hour earlier.

“I’d like to see it come to an end at this point,” the mayor added. But he said he first wanted to “hear from everyone” at the meeting, noting that there will be “plenty of room” at the Ridge High PAC.

Later in the meeting, new Committeeman Jim Baldassare Jr. drew applause when he said, “I do not and will not be supporting this plan.”

With Committeewoman Carol Bianchi also having declared opposition to the plan in November, further progress with the five-member governing body appears somewhat unlikely.

The other two committee members, Carolyn Gaziano and John Malay, worked with a prospective developer to draft the plan last year.

In response to a question from a resident, Carpenter said he expects a draft resolution to be posted on the municipal web site, www.bernards.org, on Friday, Jan. 19, five days before the special meeting.

Township Clerk Denise Szabo added that a link to the resolution will be posted on the online meeting agenda.

Six residents addressed the committee and urged ending the proposal for reasons ranging from potential traffic impacts to environmental issues at the quarry.

Sharon Vopal of Evergreen Place said an online petition opposing the plan has drawn more than 1,650 signatures.

“Please hear the voices of your community who say this plan is not the one,” Vopal said.

The defunct quarry, which consists of 180 acres on Stonehouse Road, is currently zoned for two-acre housing, which would allow a private lake and about 40 homes. But township officials have applied a state law that would allow the site to be developed differently.

The redevelopment plan, unveiled last October, calls for a public lake and park, 235 homes, a hotel with up to 250 rooms, two restaurants, 140,000 square feet of retail space and 60,000 square feet of office space.

The plan was roundly denounced at two subsequent committee meetings, with residents arguing that it would worsen traffic, create costly school needs and harm local businesses.

Opponents mobilized and created a web site, www.stopthequarryplan.com. They then incorporated as Friends of Stop the Quarry Plan (STQP).

On Tuesday, Jan. 9, after launching an online fund-raising campaign that had raised nearly \$9,000 to hire experts, Friends of STQP said it had retained legal counsel. Hired was Jay Bohn, a land use attorney with the firm of Schiller, Pittenger & Galvin of Scotch Plains.

Later that day, the New Jersey Sierra Club announced its opposition to the redevelopment plan. It said the quarry site "contains at least 45 acres of confirmed contamination, including fertilizers, lead, aluminum and silver."

"We oppose this project because we are concerned about the contamination and that the project is too large for the site," said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club.

"Given the history of the property, we are concerned it is not cleaned up properly for residential development," Tittel said. "The town needs to go back and plan for the site so that it is first properly cleaned up and then restored and then come up for a proposal for development that would fit in with the character of the community."

Public Protest

About 40 residents staged a protest in the parking lot of town hall before the committee's Jan. 9 meeting.

After walking down the municipal driveway to Collyer Lane, they stood with signs on both sides of the entrance as well as on the other side of Collyer Lane directly opposite the entrance.

The signs said "Stop the Quarry Plan," with the word 'Stop' enclosed in a red stop sign. The residents cheered while under a light post in the darkness whenever a passing motorist acknowledged them.

"I'm so passionate about this," said Madhavi Saifee of Pheasant Run Drive. "I've never been to a protest. I'm very concerned about over-development of the quarry."

"They just love the town and want to see what's best for the town," Katie Straub of South Finley Avenue said of her fellow protesters. "I'm impressed we got this many people."

Laurie Saloman of Summit Drive said STQP has supporters from all over the township, including residents of The Hills development some five miles from the quarry.

"They understand that the over-development of the quarry will impact the school system which will be truly burdened if this comes to pass," she said.

Saloman also cited the traffic impact, saying, "I live pretty close to the quarry and I can see how bad the traffic is now."

Deb Esposito of High Hill Court added that further traffic impacts would result from state affordable housing mandates here and in neighboring Long Hill Township.

The township has been sued by developers who want to add 189 housing units off King George Road, which feeds into Stonehouse Road; Long Hill has approved a plan to allow 138 housing units on Division Avenue, which also feeds into Stonehouse Road.

"It's almost like it was created in a vacuum," Esposito said of the quarry plan. "It's a shame they have to turn it into a quarry city. There are so many other ways that wouldn't impact the town negatively."

Taking It Indoors

At the subsequent Township Committee meeting, several of the residents took their stance directly to the governing body.

Lisa Winter of South Maple Avenue said she has lived in the township since 1976 and even with the passage of time, "amazingly it still looks as it did.

"We've gotten a lot more retail centers and hotels but we've kept them on the edge of town and the internal part hasn't really changed," she said. "My concern is that you're bringing high-density development into the internal part of town."

Based on professional traffic standards, Winter added, the plan would add 9,000 to 10,000 vehicular trips per day "out of that area ... right in the center" of the township.

Former Planning Board member Ann Parsekian of Berta Place said the quarry property owner, Millington Quarry Inc., is 18 months late in complying with a township ordinance that requires it to submit a revised site rehabilitation plan. The rehabilitation process is "far from complete," she said.

Urging Attendance

On Friday, Jan. 12, STQP issued a statement saying that despite the committee's intent to consider a resolution to kill the quarry plan, the "fight is far from over, and this is a very important meeting (on Jan. 24) for residents to attend."

It cited two reasons. First, "no planning should be done until contamination is remediated." Second, it said, the committee needs to rescind a redevelopment designation for the quarry and "ensure the property will revert to the two-acre zoning specified in the Master Plan once remediation and rehabilitation of the site is complete."

"Otherwise," STQP warned, "the Township Committee is free – without further input from the citizens of Bernards Township or the Planning Board – to determine how ultimately the quarry property is developed."



Quarry protest
Jan 10, 2018



Sally Booth comments
Jan 10, 2018

Deb Esposito

Basking Ridge resident

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