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TOP STORY

BERNARDS TOWNSHIP COMMITTEE

Deal OK'd to allow 222 homes in Bernards Township

By W. JACOB PERRY Staff Writer Mar 28, 2018

BERNARDS TWP. - A deal to allow an "inclusionary" development with more than 200 homes at retail and residential sites off King George Road received Township Committee approval in a 4-1 vote Tuesday, March 27, night after a mixed public response.

With the meeting drawing about 50 people, most of the committee members and residents who spoke said the deal was about the best the township could do toward meeting its state-mandated affordable housing requirement with minimal impact.

The project was seen as being on the outskirts of the township, having close access to Interstate Route 78, having limited impact on other neighborhoods, and potentially boosting business in the Dewy Meadow Village shopping center.

"The reality of the situation is that if we want to control our destiny to any small degree, we need to do what we're doing tonight," said Committeeman John Malay.

The settlement would allow a developer to build 222 housing units, of which 34 would be income-restricted, at two adjacent, jointly owned sites off King George Road. State rules allow developers to subsidize each cost-restricted home with a multiple of up to six market-priced homes.

There would be 198 housing units, of which 30 would be income-restricted, in place of the former A&P supermarket building and a second retail building in the rear section of Dewy Meadow Village.

There would be another 24 housing units, of which four would be income-restricted, built in the midst of the Crown Court apartment complex.

As the review began, Township Attorney John Belardo explained that the number of affordable homes the township must permit will ultimately be set by a state Superior Court.

A state advocacy group, the Fair Share Housing Center, wants the court to require far more affordable homes than the township feels are necessary, Belardo said. Entities that own Dewy Meadow and Crown Court - both controlled by the Wilf brothers of Short Hills - have "intervened" in the case with an offer to build the housing, he said.

The judge, Thomas C. Miller, has encouraged towns to try to settle the issue with Fair Share instead of going to trial, he said.

Belardo noted that while the court's deadline to intervene is long past, Community Investment Partners (CIP), which has contracted to buy the Millington Quarry on Stonehouse Road, has asked the court to let it join the case.

The deal with the Wilfs would provide the township with not only affordable homes but additional "credits" toward its obligation, he said. If, he added, the deal with the Wilfs is approved, the township would be in a better position to keep CIP out of the case and negotiate a more acceptable deal with Fair Share.

'More Students'

Ten residents posed questions but most said they understood why the deal with the Wilfs was being sought.

"I do think your general proposal makes a lot of sense," said Bill Allen of Holmesbrook Road, a former member of the Township Committee.

But some residents cited downsides from additional housing.

Rita Zarabara of Thackeray Drive said 222 extra homes would affect Cedar Hill Elementary School.

"They will be overwhelmed with new students," she said, adding that some would also go to William Annin Middle School and Ridge High School. "Our taxes will go up to educate more students."

Zarabara also expressed concern about impacts from Long Hill Township's plan for "a large transit community" on Division Avenue near the municipal boundary.

Greg Raustad of Stonehouse Road said that in addition to school traffic, extra housing on King George Road would send more commuters up Stonehouse Road to bus and train lots.

He and his wife "picked this town because of its quiet, simple nature," he said. "I want to be able to drive around and not just sit in traffic all day."

Three merchants of Dewy Meadow voiced support for housing at the complex, saying it would revive business that fell off after the A&P closed.

Maureen Knapp, owner of Frozen Falls Yogurt, said the vacant A&P space was "a difficult sell" and was turned down by Whole Foods and Trader Joe's as being too far off the road.

As the governing body deliberated, Committeeman James Baldassare Jr. agreed that housing at Dewy Meadow is "going to be great for the businesses that are there."

As for school impacts, Baldassare said projections show district enrollment heading for a large decline.

Mayor John Carpenter said the deal was "in the best interests of the township."

Voting no was Committeewoman Carolyn Gaziano. She said that after the A&P closed, the landlord never sought the township's help for a new tenant and instead "went right to suing us."

Gaziano said Dewy Meadow would have 198 homes on only eight acres, whereas CIP's initial proposal for the quarry had 235 homes, of which 35 were to be income-restricted, on 180 acres. Moreover, she said, the quarry would have had public amenities like a lake.

"This is being forced upon us by a horrible state Legislature," she added. "We had a much better deal with the quarry."

Even the committee members who backed the deal faulted the manner in which towns are being forced to provide affordable housing.

"It was designed with a good purpose," said Committeewoman Carol Bianchi. "I think it has gotten away from that and has been taken over by developers and not serving the purpose for which it was intended."