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Complaints mount over site

Residents express concerns with Mount Construction site's use, noise

By **AUBRIE GEORGE**
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Conversation became somewhat heated at last week's Council meeting when several residents showed up to voice concern over Berlin-based Mount Construction's activity on Gravelly Hollow Road.

Roughly a dozen upset residents attended the meeting to voice their concern - most of them hailing from the Pine Pointe development that borders the municipal lot on Gravelly Hollow Road where Mount Construction stores equipment, at no cost, under an agreement with the township.

The agreement, initiated in 2006, says that Mount Construction can store trucks and equipment at the lot in exchange for their work in emergency repairs and services - such as repairing roads and damaged water and sewer lines.

The purpose, Councilman Chris Myers said, is to have the equipment close by in the event of an emergency.

Myers said the need to have an emergency contractor on site came after a flood in 2004 when the township was cited by FEMA for not having a contract for

emergency services. When another flood came in 2007 - Mount Construction repaired the damages, he said.

Under the agreement, the company was also charged with cleaning up the area where it stores the equipment, which before the clean up was littered with derelict cars and other debris.

The company also graded the site, built a new entrance, built a fence around it and paved it in exchange for using it for storage.

But residents at the meeting told Council they were concerned that the company was in breach of the agreement because trucks were leaving the lot, traveling to other towns to do work and then returning to the lot in Medford to store equipment.

"The bottom line is that there is a business going on at that location other than to serve Medford Township," resident Len Howe said.

Residents also voiced concern that the size of the company's trucks that travel back and forth on Gravelly Hollow and Jackson Roads are too big for the country roads to handle and also pose a safety concern for residents traveling on the road simultaneously.

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Residents concerned about Mount Construction site

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Another major complaint was that the company produces an inordinate amount of noise and that damage has been done to nearby houses because of the vibration from the trucks and equipment.

"I'm sure all of you like to sleep at night, but I can't because they're there," resident Nancy Schade said.

The contract the township has with Mount was initiated in 2006 for a total duration of five years – each year of the contract is renewable.

At the meeting, Township Solicitor Richard Hunt said the township has paid the company roughly \$8 million for their services over the years, most of that money came from the emergency repair services after the flood of 2007, he said.

Council told residents that the original plan has always been to eventually relocate that site.

"The long-term solution is not to keep that there," Myers said.

Residents questioned why the site was altered without submission of an application to the Pinelands Commission.

Though it was already a public works site, Council submitted an application in June, in order to maintain good relations with the Pinelands Commission, Myers said.

Hunt said the site is zoned for parks, public and education usage.

The application is currently under review by the Pinelands Commission, township officials

said.

Some Council members told residents this was the first time they had heard of the complaints, other than rumors, but as a whole, Council assured them it would investigate the issues.

By the end of the meeting, Council had passed a resolution that renews the contract with Mount Construction for utility repair and rehabilitation services for one year.

Hunt recommended Council send a letter to the company asking them to address the issues that the concerned residents had brought up within a certain period of time.

If, at any time, the company is found to be in breach of the contract with the township, the agreement can be terminated, Hunt said.

Council agreed that approving the contract at the meeting and sending out a letter of conditions was the best path forward in order to dodge financial penalties it would incur if it did not approve the contract before Aug. 31.

"If they're found to be in breach of contract, then we will act and we will discontinue it, you have my word." Mayor David Brown said.

Brown said Council would ask for the residents' help in constructing the letter in order to make sure all of their concerns are addressed. In addition, he said, Council will hold a meeting with the residents in the next two-to-three weeks after the investigation of Mount's activity at the site has taken place

In other news:

■ Council rescinded two old

resolutions in order to move forward with implementing a new health insurance plan to save money.

At its previous meeting, Council made the decision to terminate participation in the New Jersey State Health Benefits Program and instead engage in a self-insurance program through Insurance Design Administrators.

The switch will save the township a total of \$347,000, or 7 percent, in the first year of participation, township officials said.

At the last meeting, Township Manager Mike Achey said the new plan goes into effect beginning Sept. 1.

■ Council passed two resolutions approving shared services agreements with nearby municipalities. The agreements appoint one construction code official and one building sub code official to cover the duties of Medford and the other municipalities involved. Officials said both shared services plans would save the township about \$80,000.

■ Township engineer Chris Noll told Council that as soon as the township receives approval from the Pinelands Commission for the relocation of a stormwater basin, the Route 70 and Hartford Road intersection improvement project can go out to bid.

Noll said he expects construction to begin this fall and that the project will take about two-to-three months to complete.

Council ended last week's meeting by entering into an executive session to discuss litigation and personnel matters.

Council is scheduled to meet again on Tuesday, Sept. 8 at 7:30 p.m.