

Construction firm stirs concerns in Medford

By: ED MOORHOUSE

August 27, 2009

MEDFORD - The Township Council has renewed a contract with a construction company amid questions from residents and the Pinelands Commission that the firm is using a municipal storage lot to do business outside the town.

Since 2006, Mount Construction, headquartered in Berlin, Camden County, has been allowed to store its trucks and equipment at the Gravelly Hollow Road site at no cost in return for repairing roads and water and sewer lines as well as performing other work in the township, officials said.

"The main purpose of (the contract) is to have those trucks close by so we can make repairs very quickly," Councilman Chris Myers said during Tuesday's council meeting.

Medford Solicitor Richard Hunt said the township has paid Mount about \$8 million for various jobs, with a significant portion being spent on flood recovery in 2007.

The one-year agreement was first signed in 2006 after a public bidding process, with up to four one-year renewals.

Mount Construction was the only company that bid on the contract.

According to the agreement, Mount had to clean up, grade and pave the public works site, which was littered with old vehicles and debris, at its own expense, officials said. However, the agreement was made without an application being submitted to the Pinelands Commission for approval of the cleanup or any alterations to the site.

Township officials, who eventually submitted an application in June, said they thought it was unnecessary because the site was already a public works yard.

Dave Smith, Mount Construction CEO and a township resident, acknowledged Wednesday that his equipment is being used outside the township, but said, "The contract is not specific to storing equipment only used in Medford."

The Pinelands Commission disagreed.

"Available information . . . suggests that the private contractor that is occupying the area is utilizing the area for activities other than Medford Township public works purposes," Charles M. Horner, the commission's director of regulatory programs, said in a letter sent to the township Friday. "Commercial uses do not appear to be permitted in Medford Township's (parks and public education) zoning district."

Horner's letter said public garages and storage buildings are permitted.

Township officials said Wednesday they have received the commission's letter and are reviewing it.

Mount's operation has angered residents who live in the nearby Pine Pointe neighborhood.

Nancy Schade, one of about 10 irate residents who attended Tuesday's meeting, said she was shocked that council members hadn't heard about their concerns.

"The trucks are going to other towns and working, then returning to Medford," Schade said. "I've seen it."

"The bottom line is, there is a business operating out of that location in the township of Medford," resident Len Howe said.

Mayor David Brown said the council would investigate the residents' claims.

"The reality of what you're saying is that there is business activity going on there," Brown said. "I know that if you are telling me that, and there are other people here telling me that, we will check it out."

Hunt recommended that officials send a letter to Mount summarizing the residents' concerns.

Although the four council members present at Tuesday's meeting unanimously agreed to renew the contract with Mount, Brown said: "If there is a breach of the contract, we will act."

Meanwhile, the Pinelands Commission has reviewed the township's belated application for the work Mount performed at the storage site and has compiled a list of conditions.

"We . . . identify items that need to be addressed, including information demonstrating that this development is consistent with Pinelands stormwater management regulations," commission spokesman Paul Leakan said.

According to Horner's letter, no further development of the site, including construction, clearing or land disturbance, may occur until the application process is complete.

"If the application is deemed to be consistent with our regulations, we would recommend approval by the full 15-member Pinelands Commission," Leakan said. "Right now we're in the heart of the review process. More information is needed before we can deem the application complete or determine whether it meets Pinelands regulations."

Contact: emoorhouse@phillyBurbs.com 609-871-8057

August 27, 2009