

## Bitterly divided council approves senior housing before angry crowd

by Adam Tait III  
for the Community News

**PEMBERTON**—"Liar, liar, pants on fire." That angry retort, from Councilman Rick Prickett, to Councilwomen Sherry L. Scull, briefly delayed a vote approving a zoning overlay to permit extensive development of the more than 300-acre Greenberg dairy farm in the northern end of town.

The bitterly contested 3-2 vote, at 1:30 a.m. last Thursday, following over four hours of heated debate, came as a disappointment to the approximately 60 in attendance, who overwhelmingly opposed the decision.

Prickett was referring to words Scull had written on a note to him seconds before. His outburst threw the contentious meeting into disarray, just after Council President Diane P. Stinney had moved for a vote.

The vote will allow the construction of up to 600 homes for senior citizens and the disabled on 100 acres, leaving the rest of the tract undeveloped. The original July proposal had called for 162 acres to be developed. Homes will be a combination of single family, independent living, assisted living and congregate care. The developer, when chosen, will pay for the extension of sewer

Design Group. Buildings will be limited to 35 feet in height.

About 40 speakers opposed the plan, while only two supported it. Speakers ranged from eloquent to poignant, to sarcastic and angry.

After Prickett's remark, the normally unflappable Stinney, who had been urging the audience to show better manners, was clearly shaken. She announced a break, which brought protests from the audience that there was a motion for a vote. Regardless of procedure, council members rose, some mingling with spectators, others retreating to a side room.

Bob Pelletier had concerns on two issues. One was the anticipated heavy increase of traffic. He and many others also questioned how many Pemberton-area seniors would be likely to leave their homes, most valued in the \$150,000 range, to trade up to homes expected to sell in the \$250,000 range.

Another resident, Bob Brasher, drew loud applause from the audience as he described the Greenberg tract as some of the finest farmland in the state. He also questioned the timing of the debate at the holiday season, wondering if that was an attempt to pass the meas-

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preoccupied. He said he had called 150 local residents. Of the 40 he reached, he claimed only 10 were aware of the issue.

Others against the plan were Theresa Lettman, Director of Monitoring of the Farmlands Preservation Alliance, and residents Eric Houwen and Mark Ward.

All believed the plan was ill-conceived and ill-advised, that there were better alternatives and that farmland, once developed, was lost forever. Bob Cushman, a spokesman for Pemberton First, a civic group, agreed the plan was poorly developed and said that with the many changes since it had originated, it would be better to scrap it

and begin again. He accused Ragan of making misleading statements and said the whole process was loaded against residents. He said he believed local owners, developers and politicians were ignoring voters. Pemberton First, he said, had 220 signatures on petitions, not opposing development in general, but opposed to this plan.

A weary Ragan responded by praising Cushman's "tireless advocacy" for his group, but denied again there were any major wetlands, denied that eminent domain was being considered and denied that a developer had been picked in advance.

Another hotly debated issue was if there really was any large demand for senior housing. Both sides produced sharply opposing figures, one showing a high demand; another that there was enough housing for the group in New Jersey until 2026.

Resident Steve Skulimoski, while in favor of housing for the disabled, was still opposed to the project, believing it was not the best answer.

The most impassioned supporter for the plan was Realtor and township Planning Board member Helen Kemp. She praised the new master plan as strongly in favor of "smart growth," preserving 50 percent of the land and said that Democrats and Republicans agreed that the plan was about "getting something right for this

town."

At this point, Stinney turned to fellow Council members for their comments.

First up was Thomas Inge, Council's lone Republican and an outspoken opponent. Obviously angry, he said the plan doesn't help the town's seniors, many of whom "are hurting." He said he sees no need for it, and that the township would be far better off fixing current residences and the Browns Mills shopping center.

Scull said both parties had run on platforms of attracting ratables, that Pemberton, as an Abbott district, was having 90 percent of its school costs picked up by the state and that a day of financial reckoning was coming due.

Prickett, also upset, asked, "whose vision?" referring to the master plan. He said voters had been told constantly it would be "their plan," and that "hasn't happened." He said that at every meeting, residents were "overwhelmingly opposed," to the development, with only Mayor David Patriarca in

favor. Prickett said he represents voters, not politicians or developers, then read the names of 100 residents opposed to the plan. His remarks drew thunderous applause.

It was at that point Stinney said she was "saddened" by the continued heckling. Prickett lashed out at Scull and the break was called.

Immediately following the break, the ordinance was put to a vote. The polling took less than a minute and seemed almost anticlimactic. Stinney, Scull and Ken C. Cartier voted "yea," Inge and Prickett "nay," and it was over, except for loud grumbling and warnings of "don't forget November 2010," a reference to the next election.

The meeting, however, went on. The solicitor, engineer and business administrator all announced, to the great relief of those still in attendance, that they had no reports to make. Two other speakers made brief remarks. Then, mercifully, at 1:58 a.m., the meeting ended.