

Pemberton Township amends master plan

BURLINGTON COUNTY TIMES

By: MARK ZIMMARO

Saturday, July 11th, 2009

An amended master plan that could change the look of the northern end of town has left opponents feeling betrayed.

The Planning Board unanimously approved amendments, the first in nearly 37 years, to the plan at Thursday's meeting, opening the door for development in areas along North Pemberton, Birmingham and Arney's Mount roads, which are among a small percentage of township land not located in the environmentally sensitive Pinelands.

About a dozen disappointed residents walked out of the meeting after the board's vote.

"I feel like (the Planning Board) didn't listen to us," said Caroline Radice, a member of a grassroots organization called Pemberton First, which opposes the development of farmland. "When they started the study for the master plan, they had visioning meetings and went out to ask residents for feedback about what they wanted to see in their communities. However, the plan they developed doesn't incorporate the residents' feedback at all."

One of their biggest concerns is the former Greenberg dairy farm on North Pemberton Road. Zoning changes would allow public water and sewer extensions, which could accommodate higher density residential and commercial development.

Township officials have said that a 55-and-older housing complex could be one of the projects on that site. The existing zoning for the Greenberg farm is agriculture and permits residential construction at a density of one home per six acres.

Some residents voiced their displeasure with the master plan in the hallway outside the meeting, which did not permit public comment on agenda items.

"They heard us — they just already had their plans," said Eric Houwen, a North Pemberton Road resident. "They already knew what they wanted to do."

Proponents of the changes said the township needs to attract development to help stabilize rapidly rising property taxes.

Mayor David Patriarca said the Planning Board listened to residents' concerns at the last meeting, which was open to public comment. He said the board's decision was based on what the majority of residents wanted.

"They think they're the only ones with a voice," Patriarca said of the opponents. "Each individual has one voice in this town and we hear from many, many individuals who promote

development on the north side of town. There are some people out there that you just aren't going to please. I think it's a responsible plan. I think it's a plan that mirrors smart growth being pushed by the state and the county. And I think the little bit of development we are proposing will not change the quality of life significantly in that area."

Councilman Rick Prickett, also a member of Pemberton First, said the group has collected more than 100 signatures on a petition opposing the development and is anticipating that several more residents will join the cause.

"I was very disappointed with the decision," Prickett said. "We have over 120 signatures and we plan to keep collecting signatures of people of opposition to development on the Greenberg farm."

The plan will go to the Township Council, which can change zoning. Officials said that there is no known planner and that development could take years.

"Keep in mind this is not something that's going to happen overnight," Patriarca said. "Currently our plan is approved, but nothing can occur before council elects to change the zoning."