

Residents criticize Stafford Township council for "ignoring" business park development restrictions

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By ROB SPAHR, Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday,
August 4, 2010 |

STAFFORD TOWNSHIP — The Township Council tabled a public hearing and vote Tuesday afternoon on a controversial ordinance to amend the redevelopment plan for the Stafford Business Park. But that didn't prevent township residents from venting their frustrations over the plan as well as what they considered the council's lack of transparency.

Residents said the council was ignoring the development restrictions set forth in the agreement the township made with the state Pinelands Commission in order to get the Stafford Business Park built.

The township is considering asking to have the restrictions changed to allow an increase in the amount of family residential units allowed per acre and the installation of solar panels on the capped portion of the former landfill, which under the agreement is supposed to remain undisturbed in perpetuity.

Theresa Lettman, of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, criticized the Township Council for trying to cut short preservation of the landfill site.

"Perpetuity means forever," she said, adding that the wildlife that was displaced in order for the business park built hasn't even been able to take hold in the new area that was supposed to be preserved for it, yet it was already in danger of getting displaced again.

Township resident Sal Sorce compared the council members to the biblical traitor Judas for going against the will of the taxpayers who elected them and, instead, looking out for the interests of a private developer.

Margit Meissner-Jackson, a conservation chair for the local chapter of the Sierra Club, also expressed concerns that installing the piling for the solar panels to sit on would penetrate the landfill's cap, potentially causing water quality issues.

Other residents criticized the Township Council for a lack of transparency, blocking a petition signed by more than 1,000 local residents that called for specific changes in the township's form of government, and for not sticking to its regular meeting schedule.

Mayor John McMenamain said he was unprepared for the criticisms of the solar panel plan, claiming that he hadn't heard anything about it yet.

But McMenamain did claim school officials assured him that changing the property restrictions for the residential units in the business park from age-restricted to family housing, which includes children, would not have a negative effect. He also defended the council's transparency.

"There were more people here than who come to our 7 p.m. meetings," he said referring to the large audience that showed up to Tuesday's 4 p.m. meeting. "We cancel meetings when we don't have enough on our agenda. ... It's a cost savings measure, because we don't have to pay the attorney or for the television broadcast, we don't have to pay our staff overtime, and it allows Jim (Moran, the township administrator) to work his regular schedule."

McMenamin said Tuesday's meeting was bumped up three hours solely to give the council an opportunity to interview the candidates for police chief, and that the council delayed voting on the ordinance amending the redevelopment until Aug. 17 because it wanted to have more time to review it.

In other business: The Township Council interviewed two of the three candidates for police chief during an executive session Tuesday night. However, it could not appoint a chief because the third candidate (Gordon Von Schmidt) was injured in an biking accident while on vacation and could not make it back in time for the meeting, McMenamain said.

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