

Two sides of Waterview issue concerning Parsippany and Mountain Lakes not given equal time to speak

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The saga continues as the long-awaited vote on the overlay zone that would open the door for the controversial Waterview development project to move forward was postponed from September until the next Council meeting on Oct. 1.

At the start of the meeting on Sept. 17, Parsippany Council President Brian Stanton laid out the evening's schedule and ground rules for the more than 400 people in the Parsippany Hills High School auditorium.

The rules included a 10:30 p.m. cutoff for public comments. The time limit is what caused the subject to be tabled and the vote was held over to the next meeting as the line of people seeking to comment exceeded the allotted time.

After a mayoral proclamation and some standard Council business, the overlay zone agenda item began with PowerPoint presentations relating to how the plan to develop a 26-acre tract in the Intervale section of town is either consistent or inconsistent with the Master Plan, along with traffic and fiscal impacts of the project.

Edward Snieckus, the Planning Board's expert, gave a report on how the project aligns with the 2004 Master Plan. His report was basically the same overview he had given previously and which was unanimously approved by the Planning Board.

Snieckus offered his opinion of the points about where the Waterview project advanced certain goals and objectives of the Master Plan and points in which is inconsistent.

The planner mentioned goals 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 10 – leaving out 2, 7, 8 and 9.

His approach was challenged later in the meeting by an Intervale area resident, Steve Arnold, who noted that all goals and objectives of the Master Plan should be looked at in relation to the project.

During the public portion of the meeting Arnold said, "You [Snieckus] failed to mention other goals of the Master Plan that are relevant such as open space, historic sites and degradation of land."

Overall, Snieckus concluded that the consistencies, which included transitional uses and protection and conservation of the water supply, outweighed inconsistencies such multi-family residences and large-scale

commercial development being discouraged.

His report and those of his colleagues that followed were ridiculed by the crowd. During the public comment portion of the meeting, it was mentioned often that the presentations by the "township's experts" were inconsistent and one-sided.

Resident Forest Palling said the reports seemed, "skewed – a joke, disgrace and pathetic."

Gordon Meth, director of traffic engineering for the RBA Group and the township's traffic expert, did an assessment and concluded that adding 60 residences, two big box stores and several other smaller retail spaces would have "non-existent" impact on Route 46 traffic conditions during peak hours.

He added that potential problems could be addressed by retiming traffic signals and adding left-turn arrows "to both directions of Waterview Boulevard" and the southbound right turn lane.

That conclusion led to outright laughter from the assembly.

Mary Purzycki an outspoken resident, countered that she has been active in town since the 1980s and formerly drove a school bus.

"Over the years I've watched the traffic grow while the experts said the impact would be minimal — it wasn't; it was major." She added, "It's time to stop and listen to the people. The taxpayers paid for these studies and what was presented was so slanted the developer should have paid for it."

Councilman Paul Carifi Jr. voiced skepticism about Meth's methodology, only looking at weekday and Saturday impacts. "What about Sunday?," he asked.

The final expert testimony addressed the fiscal impact of the project, something requested by opponents in earlier meetings.

The fiscal impact analysis was done and presented by Joseph Burgis, a principle of Burgis Associates.

School taxes account for more than 60 percent of property tax dollars and the cost of educating a child is on average more than \$15,000 a year. Therefore, the number of school-aged children who would live in the 60 townhouses is an important component of the fiscal picture of the project.

Based on his research, Burgis projected that a total of 23 children would reside in the Waterview townhomes. The breakdown he offered was 13 preschool-aged children; five children in kindergarten through fifth grade; two children in sixth through eighth grade and three high school-aged children.

"We anticipate 10 public school [age] children," Burgis said.

The crowd booed and snickered.

Then Burgis estimated the Waterview project would produce 285 new jobs. Mayor James Barberio had cited

job creation as one his primary motives for supporting the project. He estimated 500 jobs would be created.

Frank Gigaro, a 50-year resident, said, "This is not about jobs. It's about our lives, our children, our family and our neighbors. It's the wrong thing to do. Vote no. Please."

On the revenue side Burgis estimated that the taxes collected would be about \$1,137,259. The breakdown of those dollars is: \$723,429 for the school district; \$245,559 for municipal government; \$126,314 for county government; \$18,108 for local library; \$8,392 for county open space; \$7,949 for Fire District No. 6; and, \$7,508 for municipal open space.

Council Vice President Vincent Ferrara noted that those numbers are based on 100 percent occupancy of the residential and retail space.

Councilman Jonathan Nelson added that the municipal portion is a relatively small percent of the township's overall budget.

Project opponents, however, have been insistent that the costs of the plan are being overlooked and not balanced against the revenues.

Carifi, a retired law-enforcement officer, agreed that factors in the revenue equation had been omitted, such as the cost of police and emergency responses related to big box stores.

"I've worked in a lot of different towns in Morris County that have these types of shopping centers and I can tell you that there are a large number of response calls to these facilities."

He asked Burgis if he had any of the figures related to crime and emergency impacts. After more than a year of hearings, Burgis said there wasn't time to get that data.

The major "slight" of the night came when Stanton refused to give equal meeting time to a team of experts hired and paid for by a grassroots group of area residents, who had formed a nonprofit organization named Citizens for Health, Safety and Welfare (CHSW).

These professionals were not given a chance to present their findings or rebut the findings of the township's experts, whose presentation last more than 30 minutes. Instead they were allotted the same three-minute comment opportunity as all public speakers.

Rob Simon, the attorney for CHSW, called the reports and conclusions by the township's experts, "fatally flawed and terribly tainted. This is spot zoning at its best," he said.

He noted that a petition containing signatures of 20 percent of the stakeholders within 200 feet of the Waterview property and also members of the Mountain Lakes Borough Council makes it a requirement that the ordinance be approved by two-thirds of the five-member Parsippany Township Council, not a simple majority.

Elliot Ruga, an analyst for the Highlands Coalition and an expert retained by CHSW, warned that the Waterview tract is in an area with the "highest degree of water deficit."

Another CHSW expert, Rob Morrow with Princeton Hydro, advised that the high density of this project was tantamount to the impacts of mining. He said the project, "will affect Parsippany's wellhead."

Robert Dean the CHSW's traffic engineer said there were "significant deficiencies and the absence of materials" in the information presented by Meth. He said the traffic rating resulting from the project would be an "F" which is outlawed in Parsippany's ordinance.

"It doesn't meet ordinance safeguards for adequate traffic flow," Dean said. "It is incumbent on this Council to get answers. This is not a feasible project."

The final CHSW expert to attempt to cram his report into the three-minute allotment was planner Peter Steck. He advised there were procedural defects, improper spot zoning and inconsistencies in the plan.

Counter to Snieckus' conclusion, Steck said, "This project does not advance the public good."

Of the more than 30 people who spoke on the record, only two offered support for the project.

One was Arne Berg, a union worker, who said, "We need some jobs out of this, people have to pay their taxes."

The other was Mike Pulsinelli, a representative for the Parsippany-based International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 102, which has 3,500 electrician members.

"That's 400 workers and family members who live and vote in Parsippany," he noted.

Pulsinelli questioned the source of the money for the CHSW's experts, drawing the ire of the crowd. He asked, "Who's paying for the professionals for the residents they are representing?"

He was followed to the microphone by Jackie Bay, CHSW vice president.

"That money was raised by the good people of Parsippany and Mountain Lakes," she said. "Every nickel of that was raised the absolute hard way. There was not one dollar from a political party or governing body. We worked hard for that money and to suggest anything different is insulting."

This issue of Parsippany Life went to press before the Tuesday, Oct. 1, Township Council meeting.

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