

Middletown board hears controversial housing plan

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Written by Kevin Pentón | Staff Writer

MIDDLETOWN — More than 225 people squeezed into Town Hall Wednesday night to witness the Planning Board consider a controversial housing proposal for the former Avaya site in Lincroft.

Four Ponds Center Associates proposes to build 342 residential units, of which 68 would comply with state Council on Affordable Housing regulations, said Jason Greenspan, township planner.

The 68 affordable units are expected to be two-to-three bedroom apartments, while all but four of the rest would be town houses to be sold at market rates, Greenspan said.

Some of the neighbors of the 67-acre site on Middletown – Lincroft Road are concerned the project would generate traffic that would overwhelm area roads, reduce property values and diminish their quality of life. Some at the meeting wore white T-shirts with a red line across “342 UNITS.”

After listening to testimony from the project engineer, the Planning Board adjourned the hearing on the application until June 1.

Because the proposal complies with the zoning requirements, it will not need to appear before the Zoning Board of Adjustment for any variances, Greenspan said.

Over the course of several months, the Planning Board is expected to spend some time reviewing Four Ponds’ traffic study, its environmental impact study, and the project impact on the neighborhood’s sewer capacity, said Anthony Mercantante, township administrator.

“We’ve raised some questions about some of the data they have presented,” Greenspan said Monday. “They’ll have an opportunity to respond.”

The Township of Middletown Sewerage Authority is currently studying how much of the neighborhood sewer capacity is reduced by rain water infiltrating the system through broken pipes or connections, said Rick Brodsky, an attorney representing Four Ponds.

The findings, which Brodsky anticipates will be complete in four months, will help determine the extent of repairs the authority will need to perform, and how much capacity Four Ponds will need to add so the neighborhood’s sewer needs are met.

“I suspect another pump station is going to be required,” Thomas Hall, a planning board member, said Wednesday.

He asked Brodsky whether Four Ponds will pay for a new pump station.

“The developer will certainly pay its fair share,” said Brodsky, drawing catcalls from many in the audience.

Although Avaya left the site about two years ago, its lease for the building expires in January 2012, Brodsky said.

Avaya Inc., an office telecommunications equipment maker, was spun off of Lucent Technologies in 2000.

In 2009, the township rezoned the property so it could be part of its affordable housing plan, projecting that 75 affordable units would eventually be built there. Should only 68 be built, Middletown may need to find alternative locations for the remaining seven, Greenspan said.

On Monday, several members of the Township Committee said that while they disapprove of the Four Ponds proposal, they could do little because of the COAH requirements.

The owners of the Bamm Hollow Country Club, also located in Lincroft, are suing Middletown because the township chose the Avaya site rather than the golf course for inclusion in the affordable housing plan, said Brian Nelson, the municipality's attorney.

Had Middletown rezoned the Bamm Hollow site so it could have been part of the plan, it could have fit 1,200 residential units, of which several hundred would have been affordable, Mayor Anthony Fiore said.

"Three-hundred-forty-two units is ridiculous; 1,200 units is absurd," said Fiore on Monday. "There was nothing we could do to stop it."

Some opponents of the residential proposal for the Avaya site have questioned why Middletown does not simply rezone the property again and take its chances in court, should Four Ponds sue. Nelson said such an effort would be unsuccessful and could result in more affordable housing units being built in the township.

"Anybody's who's been through this before knows you're going to lose," Nelson said on Monday. "People were under the impression that COAH is gone. It's not."

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