

# Board OKs plan that would block town center

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KEYPORT BUREAU

**MIDDLETOWN** — The Planning Board last night unanimously adopted a new master plan that supports a zoning change designed to prevent the construction of a \$150 million town center proposed four years ago as a mix of retail offices and homes on Route 35.

**"With all the empty storefronts along Route 35, to propose another shopping area is irresponsible."**

— *Jill Henry,*  
*Middletown*  
*resident*

The board will hold a special meeting at 7 p.m. Oct. 27 to adopt a resolution to make last night's action official.

Jill Henry, a resident of the Lincroft section, said an age-restricted housing development is an "interesting alternative to the town center."

"With all the empty storefronts along Route 35, to propose another shopping area is irresponsible," Henry said. "The traffic and all the shopping is already ridiculous."

The new zoning was originally recommended in a township master plan adopted last year by the board. But that master plan was overturned in court in July because four board members, including Chairwoman Judith Stanley Coleman, were members of a neighborhood group that actively opposed the project.

Superior Court Judge Lawrence M. Lawson, sitting in Freehold, ordered the board to start from scratch and develop another master plan. The board started holding meetings in September to develop a new plan by working from a document adopted in 1993.

Coleman and three other board members did not participate in a series of

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master plan meetings held since September, including the hearing last night, as ordered by the court.

The family of Assemblyman Joseph Azzolina, R-Monmouth, has been entangled in a four-year battle with the township, seeking approval for a town center development that would span 137 acres along Route 35, between Kanes Lane and Kings Highway East.

In 1993, the Planning Board adopted a master plan that recommended a 200-acre town center, but the Township Committee only zoned 85 acres for the project because that was all that Azzolina owned at the time, township Planning Director Anthony Mercantante has said.

Zoning for a town center made sense only on land under a single ownership, he said.

Azzolina's family bought more property after 1993, and asked the committee to change the zoning on the rest of that land to create a contiguous, 137-acre town center. The com-

mittee rejected his request in 2000. As a result, his family filed an application in 2000 seeking variances from the Board of Adjustment to build the project.

Azzolina turned the development over to his son, Joseph Jr., and his nephew, Philip Scaduto — principals in the Mountain Hill Group — shortly after the application was filed four years ago.

The zoning board turned down the application last year, and the developer filed a lawsuit challenging the decision. The developer also is challenging the zoning change to the property in court.

Lawson's ruling did not bar the Planning Board from coming to the same conclusion reached in the 2003 master plan that was overturned, board attorney Lawrence Carton said after the meeting. But he said the master plan adopted last night contains recommendations and suggested zoning modifications that were not part of the 2003 plan.

"This is not the same master plan," he said.

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