

# Residents oppose recreation facility

Mayor: Middletown-Lincroft Road tract is among sites under consideration

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KEYPORT BUREAU

MIDDLETOWN — Donald Howell remembers when there was a horse farm behind his Denise Court home in the Lincroft section of the township.

That was before the township purchased two 7.5-acre tracts on Middletown-Lincroft Road about two years ago through the state Green Acres program. Now, for the last few months, Howell and other residents have been up in arms over what they say is a township proposal to build a large-scale recreational facility on that site, although town officials staunchly deny that claim.

"This is about putting a mini-Meadowlands complex in our backyard," said Howell, 64, who was joined by more than 70 other residents Monday night for a community meeting about an issue that has pitted residents against township officials and caused "No Sports Complex" signs to pop up on lawns all over Lincroft.

The meeting, organized by the Stop the Sports Complex community group, as it is informally known, was aimed at urging local residents to write letters and show support at Township Committee meetings to let officials know the site is not a good choice for any recreational facility, said Tony Avallone, 55, co-organizer of the group.

Avallone and others close to the issue say they first heard of plans for the site at a Lincroft neighborhood meeting earlier this year, which was attended by township officials.

"Putting anything there will just demolish the whole neighborhood," said Walter Jakovcic, co-organizer of the group, whose property borders the open space in question.

But Mayor Thomas G. Hall said "a lot of misinformation" has been spread about so-called proposals for the land and that it is only one of a handful of sites being considered for Middletown's "acute need" for additional recreational space.

"For anyone to conclude that it's a done deal and we're going ahead with it, really hasn't asked me," Hall said. "The fact of the matter is, we still don't know if it's even feasible to put an athletic field there."

Township officials ordered a wetlands delineation of the area to determine if there was the possibility of using the land for anything but open space, said Planning Director Anthony Mercantante. As of early Monday evening, Mercantante said he had not heard if the study had been completed.

Patrick Short, a Democratic candidate for Township Committee, urged town officials at Monday's meeting to immediately "quit spending money trying to assess this location," because traffic problems and ecological concerns make the site a poor choice for any development.

But Hall said dismissing any open space without research "would just be irresponsible on the part of elected officials."