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ONLINE EDITION FRIDAY AUGUST 20, 2004



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News

GNE Sets Tone for Civil Discourse on Rezoning

Calls for Peninsula-Wide Planning

By Carol Frank

At a well-attended, well-conducted meeting on August 9 the Village of Great Neck Estates mayor and trustees began an exploration to determine the desires of their residents on the concept of rezoning commercial property in the village to multi-family residences. The overwhelming response of the residents in attendance was a hearty "No" and the most significant offshoot of the dialogue was a statement by Mayor David Fox that he has approached the Town of North Hempstead with a request that they oversee the development of a peninsula-wide master plan.

If there was a theme to the evening, it was that some entity must look at the "big picture," instead of looking at one corner, one intersection, one stretch of roadway, one proposal, the typical approach taken by experts when asked to assess the impact of a project on the surrounding community.

In a letter that had been sent to all village residents inviting them to the meeting, Mayor Fox explained that two applications regarding multifamily housing have come before the village. One application is to expand the Playhouse Condominium from six apartments to 22 within the existing footprint of the historic building, a proposal which would not require rezoning. The second request is from the owner, GN Properties, LLC, of the commercial building, 212-230 Middle Neck Road, that sits between the Shell station and North Clover Drive to erect a three-story apartment building with 41 units.

At the meeting Mayor Fox began by saying, "This board does not yet know half of what we will need to know to make a decision ... Your input will help us ... everyone will be heard and no decisions will be made tonight. We have been asked why we're holding such a meeting in August when many people are away. This is just a starting point and I can assure you that there will be many more opportunities for our residents to be heard."

The trustees were given an opportunity to amplify on various pros and cons of rezoning from commercial to multifamily, although it was noted that their remarks did not necessarily reflect their personal positions. Sid

Krugman began with an explanation of the village's legal responsibilities regarding rezoning. He said that under NYS Incentive Zoning, villages may exercise flexibility for 'spot zoning,' which refers to a project being in the middle of properties with different zoning. He also restated an oft mentioned point that rezoning an area does not set a legal precedent, opening a floodgate for others; however, he went on to note that if hypothetically there are 20 sites proposed for rezoning and 18 are approved, if the 19th developer to come along is denied, he or she may well have grounds for a lawsuit.

Mr. Krugman said that if a developer convinced the board that rezoning was a good idea, local legislation would have to be passed; he also added that the village is not under any mandate to change the zoning.

Trustee Howard Hirschmann summarized the negative consequences of more multifamily residences in the area stating concerns about increased traffic, and the resulting burden on existing services such as fire and ambulance, water, and school resources. He also addressed a topic that reverberated throughout the night's meeting, the desire to maintain the character and look of the village. He said, "You can imagine what this community would look like and the problems that will occur if everything from the police station to North Clover Drive on Middle Neck Rd. were multi-family dwellings." He and numerous other speakers pointed to the traffic that clogs Middle Neck Road currently. Mr. Hirschmann said that if another apartment building goes up on Middle Neck Road, "We will exacerbate this problem by adding to the congestion that already exists."

He noted that the Manhasset-Lakeville Fire & Water District had been compelled to purchase property for more wells to stem the need to pump from wells that were becoming overwhelmed by salt-water intrusion.

He concluded with a final statement: "All in all, it is unwise to substantially change the village without a master plan that addresses all of these concerns before any action is taken, even assuming we are all in agreement. We also have to address the combined impact of the projects our neighboring villages are planning and how our decisions are impacted by them. It would be advisable to develop a peninsula wide master plan and we should get the Town involved to bring all of the Villages together."

Deputy Mayor William Warner had been asked to present the pros. He clarified that village officials have only seen a sketch from GN Properties and do not have a detailed plan before them. Mr. Warner said, "Why should we consider this? It would be irresponsible if we did not at least consider it. It would contribute to our tax base ... and it would have little impact to our residents as it is bordered by the Shell station, a synagogue and Clover Drive School."

Trustee Edy Zingher said that the focus of the village has been to "improve, correct and beautify without having a bad impact on neighbors ... we do need to consider these proposals."

Before turning the meeting over to the public, Mayor Fox reiterated the trustees' commitment to keeping the character of the Estates, while pointing out that there are a few multifamily dwellings in the village already (though none came after zoning laws were established). He added that there might be a need for more apartments in the village to accommodate current empty-nesters who would like to downsize and

yet remain in the village.

Then began the cavalcade of residents who with a few exceptions urged against increasing the population of the peninsula. One resident who stated that she had moved from Queens said, "Stick by your zoning laws ... the area I came from in Queens where there were private residences has completely changed to apartments buildings and this is why I moved ... this frightens me."

Ira Cooper agreed with prior speakers and pointed out that the trend on the peninsula has been to switch over from commercial to residential and "if commercial space continues to be whittled away, landlords will be able to up their rent because the supply of commercial properties will have been reduced."

A number of people in the audience referred to the newly approved multifamily dwelling on Middle Neck and Arrandale Avenue as evidence of the tip in the balance from commercial to residential on the peninsula. One resident who spoke mentioned the convenience of being able to go to a doctor here in town rather than having to drive to Northern Blvd. "Do we have to drive everywhere for everything?"

Another resident said that her doctor is a tenant of the 212-230 Middle Neck building and that she needs more space and has made requests to the city-based management company, Sky, which has not returned her phone calls. This resident went on to state that tenants have "onerous contracts." The Record attempted to speak with a number of the tenants of the building, but most were reluctant to speak on the record. It was confirmed however, that newer tenants have demolition clauses in their contracts, which could require them to vacate within various time periods. Some, such as La Stella, an Italian restaurant, have worked hard to become established and would not find it easy to relocate in Great Neck while other establishments are eyeing other locations in the event that they are suddenly evicted. It was also observed in visiting the site, that there is a vacancy sign in front of the building.

Former trustee Harriet Becker reminded residents of successful fights that have occurred in the village to preserve its residential, single-home dwellings and urged residents to "stay involved ... what you do really matters ... don't just think about your own block, think of the community as a whole."

Former Mayor Ed Causin commended the village board for taking a proactive stance in relation to these applications and for holding a meeting to hear community concerns. He opposes any zoning change.

Ilse Kagan, longtime village activist and former Civic Association president, stated that several years ago when another apartment building was in the offing, she very easily collected 900 signatures on a petition opposing the project. And responding to an earlier comment about empty-nesters wanting to downsize, she said, "I wouldn't want the character of my village which I have loved and cherished over the years to change, just so I could live here in an apartment."

Azriel Genachoyski refuted the notion that there would be a net increase in taxes to the village if the 41-unit building were approved stating that tax benefits would be counterbalanced by the need for increased services for the building. "Why not invite Walmart," he said facetiously, "they'll pay more taxes." He urged the trustees not to sell out for "a

couple of bucks."

Larry Nadel, another former mayor, recommended that the board should "consider the development of a two-storied apartment building which would be close in height to the surrounding buildings." He also noted that the village has been offered \$360,000 by the developer stating that if the building size were reduced, that amount might be reduced as well.

One young woman, calling herself the voice of the future, commented that young people who would like to live in Great Neck need a greater stock of apartment units and she said that compared to Brooklyn where she comes from, parking here is not a big issue.

A resident who resides on North Clover Drive warned that traffic on his street would increase with an apartment building so close by, making the neighborhood less safe for children at play.

At one point in the evening a speaker in opposition said, "Your shareholders are speaking!" David Fox's response was, "We hear you."

Attorney Paul Bloom who represents Oheb Shalom, one of the owners of the 212-230 Middle Neck Road stated that his client was disappointed in the initial response of the residents, but could not comment further.

While most concerns of the evening hovered around the 212-230 Middle Neck Road property, neighbors who immediately border the Playhouse were aghast at the prospect of suddenly having more neighbors, more noise, more cars, and more garbage.

Howard Weitzman, a former mayor and current county comptroller, did not attend the meeting, but has been closely following the issue and commented, "The best thing that could happen out of this would be the development of a peninsula-wide plan. The last one was done 30 years ago and it needs to be updated."

Town Supervisor Jon Kaiman, on his way home from another meeting, dropped by at the conclusion as people milled around outside village hall and indicated that the Town is already involved in assisting Port Washington develop a master plan and would look at a similar idea for Great Neck favorably if such a request comes forward from other villages.



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