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Wash. Twp. panel gives initial OK for affordable housing

Mt. Olive residents oppose plan Homeless Solutions pitches

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WASHINGTON TWP. -- A plan to build 10 affordable-housing units on the border of Mount Olive received preliminary approval from the township planning board Wednesday night, despite opposition from some Mount Olive residents.

All seven of the eligible Washington Township planning board members voted in favor of a resolution to draw up an approval that will give Homeless Solutions the go-ahead to begin building the units at 31 Drakestown Road. That resolution is expected to pass at the board's next meeting on Aug. 10.

"The decision was straightforward, given the fact that the application, for affordable housing, was for a permitted use in this office research zone," planning board Chairman Charles DiSalvo said. "It is consistent with our master plan. Homeless Solutions proved their ability to provide development consistent with the zone."

The vote came at about 11:45 p.m. Wednesday, after the board heard approximately three hours of testimony from planners and just less than one hour of public comment from the dozen residents in attendance.

Mayor Tracey Tobin and Committeemen Howard Popper and William Leavins recused themselves from the vote.

Homeless Solutions, which bought the property in March, plans to demolish the dilapidated, 130-year-old farmhouse and two barns that are on the lot and build two three-bedroom, six two-bedroom and two one-bedroom apartments. A 20-space parking lot would be on the south end of the lot, opening to Lotus Lane.

"We were pleased that we could complete the application," said Ray Bersch, the project manager. "We understand residents are not happy with the use, but we have tried the best we could not only to include them in the discussion in design and landscaping, but we designed the building so that they impact the neighbors minimally and mix well with to the surrounding residences."

The project has changed only a bit since it was introduced in February. The most noticeable change is the decreased mass of the buildings and their architectural style.

Planners reduced the roofline height from 34 feet to 27 feet to make the buildings look less massive.

A breezeway connecting two of the buildings was eliminated, and the buildings will be farther from Drakestown Road, Bersch said.

Rather than going for a farmstead look, planners decided to give it a "Craftsman look," to mimic the style of a home across the street, Bersch said. The buildings will have a stone base up to the first

floor windows, clapboard up to the second floor windows and stucco up to the roofs.

A fence and substantial greenery will separate the buildings from the neighbors.

Residents of Mount Olive have especially criticized the plan, expressing concerns over increased traffic, jeopardized safety and plummeting property values.

The first two meetings on the plan drew crowds of more than 100.

Jean Roy of Mine Hill Road, on the Mount Olive side of the road, was among the dozen residents who attended Wednesday's meeting.

"The deal was pre-arranged, and this was simply a dog-and-pony-show," Roy said. "This development is being dumped here, on the Mount Olive border. I feel like the residents weren't fairly represented."

Since the project was introduced, the neighbors directly next to the property have put their house up for sale. Attempts to reach Michael Kelly, the property owner, were unsuccessful, but earlier, he voiced his concern over the Homeless Solution plan.

"I'll have a view of vinyl out my window. We're 10 feet from the property line," Kelly said in February. "I signed the petition, because, like my neighbors, my wife and I are concerned about the potential type of resident that might move into the complex."

Dan McGuire, the director of Homeless Solutions' development division, said he has met privately with several concerned residents.

He said many didn't understand that affordable housing in the office research zone had been a part of the township's master plan.

In 2006, the Washington Township committee adopted an ordinance permitting a 10-unit affordable-housing plan for 31 Drakestown Road.

The plan was accepted by the state Council on Affordable Housing, which then granted the township third-round COAH certification.

The plan would fulfill 14 COAH credits, as half the units would be deemed very-low income and half low-to-moderate income housing.

That leaves the township to fill 44 credits before 2014, for a total of 117 credits.

Bersch said he expects the project would likely break ground next year, after the expected \$2.5 million in funding is in line. "We'll work hard to be good neighbors and get this constructed as expeditiously as possible," he said.
