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Residents hope U.S. Fish and Wildlife will kill Alloway Twp. housing project

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ALLOWAY TOWNSHIP - Denise Hurff would not go so far as to say she felt excited, exactly.

Sure, it felt like a victory Wednesday night when the Planning Board voted unanimously to invite the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to study the environmental impact of a controversial 22-house development planned for Watsons Mill Road.

It was, after all, something the project's opponents had been seeking for months.

Audience members were so glad to see the Planning Board do it that many applauded the decision after it was made. But on Thursday, Hurff said she was still apprehensive about how it is all going to play out in the end.

"I'm cautiously optimistic," said Hurff, a Remsterville Road resident who has lived in this sleepy Salem-County town for 18 years. "I'm not sure how this is going to go. I'm just hoping the right person seeks the information and that (the board does) what they say. It's complicated."

Almost everyone participating in the Planning Board meeting Wednesday night agreed the matter was difficult to understand. Neighbors brought up many issues, ranging from the safety of the groundwater on the 96-acre site to whether the development would harm the nearby colonies of globally threatened *Helonias bullata* plant, otherwise known as swamp pink.

Frank Hoerst, the attorney for Monmouth County-based developer, said at the meeting Wednesday night that his client, Santo Susino, has tried during the past 18 months to be a good neighbor. Susino, Hoerst said, even paid for laboratory work - something he wasn't required to do - to allay fears that the site's former use as a junkyard may have contaminated the soil and groundwater.

Susino's engineer, Joseph Ready of Swedesboro, also testified that the results showed levels of iron and manganese that, though somewhat high, were still within parameters of being naturally occurring.

The residents, though, were not swayed by Ready's assurances. They repeated their requests for independent environmental analysis and urged the Planning Board to reconsider granting preliminary site plan approval.

John Williams, who lives across the street from the proposed development, told the board he was particularly concerned about the difference between Ready's results and those obtained from a previous round of tests. Those, Williams said, showed higher amounts of heavy metals.

"It's scientifically impossible for these chemicals to be there and just disappear overnight," Williams said. "It takes decades."

The board ultimately voted 5-1 to approve the plan with a long list of conditions, including the hiring of a hydrologist and an archaeologist. The board also required that Susino, who owns the property through an entity called HKS Holdings, consult with the federal Fish and Wildlife agency.

While Hoerst said Thursday that he didn't think some of the conditions were germane to the case at hand, he did say his client got what he was after.

"Did HKS walk away with preliminary approval? Yes," Hoerst said. "Is it the end? No. We have a lot of work to do. We're going to attack those issues that we think are relevant to what we've been doing. I still don't agree that all the conditions are appropriate, but a lot of those decisions are up to my client."

Hoerst also said Susino will explore other options, including offering up the land for open space preservation.

"We're going to reactivate or renew our application to Green Acres and see if they have an interest in purchasing the parcel," he added.

Matt Blake, a program manager with the American Littoral Society, the environmental group that joined residents in opposing the development, said Thursday that many saw the Planning Board's decision in mandating U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service involvement as a victory.

The reason for that, Blake said, was because he believed the federal agency's review of Susino's plan will correct a severe error he said he perceived in the developer's submission.

Susino should not be allowed to build 22 houses on the parcel in the first place, mainly because he misapplied the township's relatively new cluster-zoning ordinance to maximize the number of houses he can build, Blake said.

In cluster zoning, houses are grouped together in one area of the site to minimize impact and increase the amount of open space. To entice that kind of design, however, regulations allow developers to build the same number of houses in a cluster plan that they would otherwise be allowed in a traditional subdivision.

In the HKS proposal, Blake said, the traditional design creates space for 22 houses, but it also includes a road that, if built, would trigger strict environmental guidelines because it crosses into regulated wetlands.

In the alternative clustered plan, that road is not there. Because of that, Blake said, the developer is successfully side-stepping government oversight that would have otherwise been triggered.

"It's going to change everything," Blake said of the new federal involvement. "It's a significant game-changer."

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