

Controversial housing plan gets North Haledon's OK

Foes warn of potential flooding, congestion

Philip DeVencentis

NorthJersey.com

USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

NORTH HALEDON - A development that will bring dozens of apartments plus a drive-thru coffee shop and a self-storage facility to an empty lot on Belmont Avenue was approved Thursday by the Planning Board after months of public hearings.

Experts for the builder said the mixed-use project at the 4.7-acre tract suits a long-term vision that the borough devised years ago. But residents who opposed the application by Tulfra Real Estate of Rochelle Park argued that it will cause traffic and disrupt the flow of stormwater that pours down the adjacent mountain.

Andrew Antropow said he was concerned that the coffee shop - a Starbucks, potentially - would create buildup on the busy county road. The thoroughfare spans about 2 miles, from the north part of the borough to the edge of Haledon.

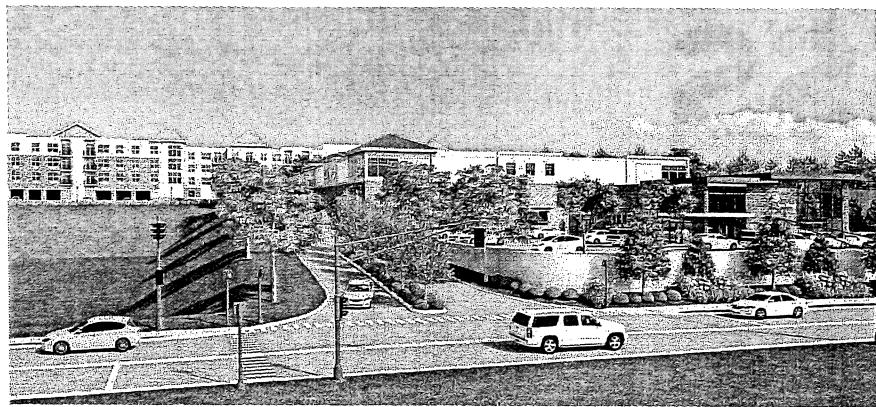
"This project just seems like a time bomb waiting to blow up," said Antropow, who lives close to the border.

The development at 987 Belmont Ave. will have 90 apartments, including 16 for low-income households, in addition to a 4,378-square-foot retail building, with two tenants, and a 74,715-square-foot storage center.

After another four hours of testimony, the board passed the controversial application in a 7-2 vote. There was considerable debate about whether the important decision should be postponed to next month.

Board Chairman Frank Coscia and board member William DeBlock dissented.

Coscia, who voiced reservations about the project since the first hearing in May, said in closing remarks



An architect's drawing of the proposed development on Belmont Avenue in North Haledon, looking west. PROVIDED BY SNS ARCHITECTS & ENGINEERS, PC

that the development is "too intense," especially since it would be built on difficult terrain and "up against a mountain."

"When it comes to water, they can say what they want to say, but I'm pretty sure that I'm going to see water issues," he said. Minutes later, he added: "I don't find this project to be good planning. I think it's not keeping with the residential character of North Haledon, and it's just a bad idea."

Meryl Gonchar, an attorney for the developer, said after the hearing that "we're very pleased" the project went through.

Fulfils obligation for affordable housing

The audience was thinner than usual, and as the night dragged on, it became even more sparse.

Mayor Randy George, who offered the motion to approve the application, said in closing remarks to a crowd of some 20 people that the development fulfills a municipal obligation to provide a fair share of affordable housing. And he said, there is little that officials can do to improve congestion on local roads.

"We live in the most densely populated area in America," he said. "New Jersey is it. To say you don't want traffic in town isn't being realistic. The mayor and council, with the help of the Planning Board, are trying to control development and not let it get out of control."

The application process was prolonged in this case because the board kept asking for revisions.

The developer and its experts complied with practically all of those requests, including pushing the construction away from the nearest residential properties on Vine Street. The buffer will be teeming with drought-tolerant shrubs and trees.

In approving the project, the board granted one variance for exceeding the maximum height of a retaining wall. A limited portion of the tiered wall to be erected in the northwest corner of the site will stand 24 feet, where 4 feet is usually allowed.

Paul Grygiel, a planner who testified on behalf of the developer, said the variance was needed because the site has such steep topography. He said the slope rises 76 feet from its lowest elevation, at Belmont Avenue, to its highest point.

Despite that challenge, Grygiel said, the property is meant to be built on. He said the project achieves the goal of a borough redevelopment plan, first released in May 2014, which prescribes diverse uses for the L-shaped lot. Most of the hearing was spent discussing stormwater retention. An engineer told the board that the project would feature a complex system of roadside inlets and underground pipes, providing enough capacity for the present-day 100-year rain event and a future 100-year rain event.

Richard Procanik, the engineer, said the drainage system that he designed could hold up to 4,900 cubic feet of water. That volume is equal to 36,655 gallons - or twice as much as a standard backyard swimming pool.

Email: devencentis@northjersey.com