

Bernardsville shopping centerl expansion changes win objector's support

Posted: Friday, December 24, 2010 1:30 am

By W. JACOB PERRY |

BERNARDSVILLE – A proposed expansion of the Bernardsville Centre on Route 202 cleared a major hurdle last week when the owners struck a deal to address the concerns of the Great Swamp Watershed Association (GSWA).

The Planning Board was told at its latest hearing on Thursday, Dec. 16, that the GSWA was satisfied with recent changes to the drainage and landscaping plans and would no longer object to the project.

The proposed addition, which would be built on 2.4 acres next to the Kings supermarket, was also scaled back slightly, from 17,303 square feet to 16,528 square feet.

The GSWA was one of two major objectors. Village Supermarkets of Springfield, which owns the Shop-Rite across the street, is still opposed.

With testimony on the project nearly complete, and with the board hoping to vote this year, a special meeting has been scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 30, at borough hall on Mine Brook Road.

The applicant, Bernardsville Centre, LLC, is seeking to expand the shopping complex to 90,363 square feet on 8.2 acres.

Several variances are being sought, including a request for deficient parking. The number of parking stalls would increase from 365 now to 424 but would still be short of the required 523.

The existing double-entrance near Kings and the double-exit near Burger King would remain largely the same, with some tweaks. Traffic lanes would be more defined to discourage crisscrossing through the lot.

Last Thursday's hearing was the tenth on the project since March 4. Much of the testimony has focused on drainage and traffic circulation.

Village Supermarkets has already had experts testify and against the project, and the GSWA had planned to have an environmental consultant critique the drainage plans.

Addressing Erosion

But the consultant, Stephen Souza of Ringoes-based Princeton Hydro, instead summarized the agreement with the applicant.

The agreement dealt with water flow and erosion, adherence to flood control ordinances, state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) permits, construction and design details, and long-term maintenance of drainage facilities.

Sally Rubin, executive director of the GWSA, said in an interview on Friday, Dec. 17, that the deal grew out of a meeting between the two parties.

A key element was handling Route 202 drainage that travels down the tract's eastern edge. Rubin said the initial plans had drainage hitting a nearby stream in a perpendicular direction, posing the threat of more erosion. She said the plans were amended to have the drainage meet the stream at an angle.

In light of that and other changes, the GSWA agreed to work with the applicant in seeking necessary permits from the DEP, she said.

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Another element involved tree-clearing. The project would remove 137 trees, triggering a borough requirement for 317 replacement trees. But the plans said no more than 69 new trees could fit on the site.

Rubin said that at the behest of the GSWA, the applicant agreed to offer tree plantings to the neighbors to help screen the project.

“I’m sorry that it took probably 11 months to sit down at the table, but I’m glad we were able to work out these issues,” she said. “We just want to work with applicants to make their developments as environmentally friendly as possible.”

Stuart J. Lieberman, a Princeton attorney representing Bernardsville Centre, said the deal would foster “good, sound environmental planning.”

“It’s important to sit down with good, worthwhile organizations like the Great Swamp Watershed Association and make sure everyone is on the same page,” he said. “It’s an example of what should happen more often, not less often.”

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