

Bernardsville Centre expansion gets green light

By W. JACOB PERRY | Posted: Sunday, February 27, 2011 2:45 pm

BERNARDSVILLE – After more than four years of trying, the owners of the Bernardsville Centre have finally obtained local approval to expand the Route 202 shopping complex.

The Planning Board voted 7-0 just before 11 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 24, to direct its attorney to draft a resolution that would allow a 16,528-square-foot addition to be built on 2.4 acres next to the Kings supermarket.

That would expand the complex to 90,363 square feet on 8.2 acres, with the new wing to extend toward Route 202 and provide symmetry with the mall's Burger King.

Brenda Curnin of Bernardsville Centre, LLC, speaking shortly after the meeting, said the addition would have three to four tenants that could include retail uses or professional services like medical offices.

"I think we're going to go at it as soon as possible but we still need tenants," she said. No tenants, she said, means "no money, no financing."

The popular complex also has three existing vacancies for space formerly occupied by a bakery, a Laundromat and a paint store.

"All these stores haven't turned over in years and years," Curnin said. "We have prospective tenants for all these stores but they need to be gutted and redone from head to toe."

The approval included several variances, including a request for deficient parking. The number of parking stalls would increase from 365 now to 425 but would still be short of the required 523.

Access changes were presented last Thursday. At the board's request, a new driveway would be built in front of the addition to allow right turns in and right turns out. The existing double-entrance in front Kings would be narrowed to a single driveway allowing turns in. The double-exit near Burger King would remain the same.

There would also be extensive drainage improvements. The large erosion ditch between Kings and Friendly's Restaurant would be covered over and the drainage handled through an underground pipe and a detention system.

Former School Property

The complex dates back to July 31, 1956, when it opened on the grounds of the former Virginia Day Nursery.

Its original anchor was the Acme supermarket, which was replaced by Kings on Oct. 5, 1978.

On Nov. 3, 1997, the complex's original owner, Carell Realty Corp., purchased an adjoining 2.4-acre newjerseyhills.com/.../article_561996f8...

lot from the Somerset Hills Regional School District for \$472,500.

Bernardsville Centre filed a proposal on Jan. 4, 2007, to build a two-story, 25,000-square-foot addition at the site. The proposal underwent about a half-dozen Planning Board hearings and drew questions about parking, traffic, drainage and lighting before it was withdrawn that December.

On March 4, 2010, hearings began on a new proposal for a two-story, 21,727-square-foot addition. But more criticism led the proposal to be scaled back last May to one story totaling 17,303 square feet, and ultimately, 16,528 square feet.

The Great Swamp Watershed Association (GSWA) and Village Supermarkets Corp. of Springfield, which owns the Shop-Rite across the street, each hired attorneys and experts to challenge the plans. But the GSWA dropped its opposition last December after changes were made to the drainage and landscaping plans.

Last Thursday's hearing, which was the twelfth on the proposal, featured a review of lighting and landscaping changes designed to limit the project's visibility from homes on Old Colony Road.

Bernardsville Centre agreed to provide evergreen plantings on several neighboring properties. In addition, truck deliveries to the rear were prohibited between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m.

But Mark Cozin of 41 Old Colony Road, predicted that traffic on Route 202 could become "a nightmare" if the complex adds another popular store.

He said that while he didn't blame the owners for seeking an expansion, the stretch between Kings and Friendly's is presently more natural "than what we're going to see there."

Stuart J. Lieberman, attorney for Bernardsville Centre, urged the board to vote for approval, saying the project was "an update, a modernization of this important facility."

Carl Kempf, attorney for Village Supermarkets, was offered a chance to argue against the proposal but declined, saying, "We will rely on the points as we've made them."

Village Supermarkets received its own Planning Board approval in January 2009 to raze the Thirsty Turtle restaurant building to provide an extra 26 parking stalls for the Shop-Rite.

Borough planners once spoke of aligning the Bernardsville Centre and Shop-Rite driveways to face each other to facilitate a traffic signal, but ultimately opted against the idea.