

Wawayanda Needs Backbone!

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Town of Wawayanda needs backbone and leadership.

By Randolph Hurst

July 10, 2007 The Republican majority on Wawayanda's Town Board has again caved in to developers, this time giving them approval to build five new subdivisions with 190 four-bedroom homes, 72 of which will be clustered on half-acre lots on former farmland with no municipal water or sewer in the Lower Road and Ridgebury Lake Estates area of the town.

It happened quietly behind closed doors without fanfare and, in April, John Razzano, as supervisor, signed a settlement endorsed by the Republican majority of the board, with Ridgebury Farms, Lakeridge Associates (aka Lower Road Associates from Long Island), Jansen and Way Way Yonder LLCs.

Residents long expressed concerns to the Town Board urging what would seem to be basic common-sense policies geared to preserving the rural character of the town. It was not an unreasonable request. They urged concurrence with the Orange County Planning Office's vision for the overall development of the county; to preserve and enhance all that the majority of folks believe is good and plan intelligently for sustainable development that does not adversely impact neighborhoods or communities.

In its plan, Orange County opposes subdivisions in rural areas but rather encourages them in or near municipalities that have public services readily available; "smart growth." There, mixed housing works well and makes affordability more of a possibility.

Residents asked for leadership and sufficient checks and balances to encourage developers to cooperate with local government officials in ensuring that their plans make sense for the area of the town they want to develop. The hope was that developers would respect the town's residents and their vision for their future; that quality standards of workmanship be maintained and that exploitation solely for capital gain simply not be allowed. That hope has been extinguished.

The settlement signed by Razzano with minor concessions essentially gives the developers everything they wanted and demonstrates a total disregard for the residents' hopes for the future of the town as expressed in their master plan, which even the Republican majority approved after ridding the committee of all the bipartisan, caring and outspoken people who originally served on it.

By giving in to the developers, the zoning in this area is essentially changed forever from Agricultural Residential to Suburban; a 72-home subdivision on half-acre lots in the middle of a field will never be seen as "rural," no matter how it is justified.

In place of hope, local residents are left with questions, concerns and fears. How will a community well serving all these homes affect the existing wells of neighboring homeowners? What recourse will homeowners have if their wells are adversely impacted, especially since the developers are no longer required to certify water capacity or be held accountable? Are residents really expected to believe that each four-bedroom home will be occupied by 2.6 people? Tell us that increased traffic can be "mitigated by widened roads," that back-country roads will be safe and uncluttered with trash betraying the true character of offenders.

Since there are no plans to protect adjoining properties from trespass, what is there to discourage ATVs or dirt bikes from destroying people's property, let alone the quiet of this "rural" area? Are there adequate emergency medical, fire and security services to accommodate this number of new families here? What about the sewer plant, runoff and pollution? What of educational resources to accommodate the children and property taxes?

These only scratch the surface of what concerns people now. The bigger question is, however, without leadership or backbone, what can residents really hope for the future of Wawayanda?

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