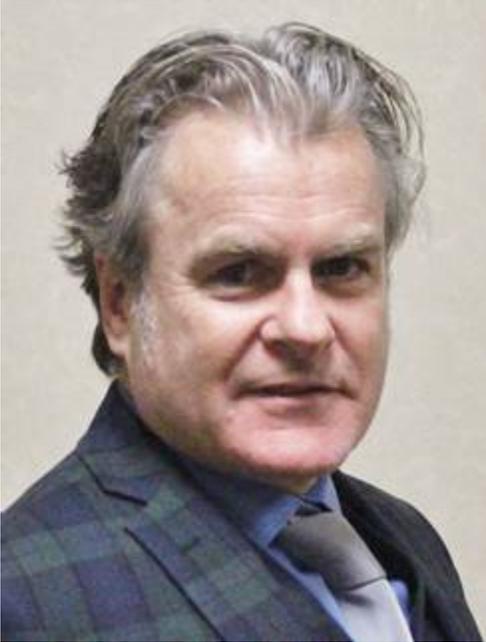


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Long Hill officials: Alternatives to housing settlement not feasible in short term

- By ALEX PARKER-MAGYAR Editor
- Nov 12, 2017

LONG HILL TWP. - Some residents say the township should seek alternatives to the terms reached in its tentative affordable housing settlement, but Township Committee members say those alternatives are not feasible at this point.

The township [agreed to settle litigation with advocacy group Fair Share Housing Center in September](#). The sides agreed on a third round housing obligation of 54 to 72 affordable housing units among some 360 total units. The units would be spread across four sites: one in Millington, two in Stirling and one in Gillette.

Under third round affordable housing rules, 15 percent of rental units must be set aside as affordable housing, or 20 percent of for-sale units. If all 360 units were to be rentals, 54 would be marked as affordable; if all 360 units were for sale, 72 would be affordable.

Nothing would need to be built for Long Hill to be in compliance, but the township would have to zone to allow for multi-family housing at the four sites. The agreement is pending approval in a State Superior Court fairness hearing.

Residents at the Wednesday, Nov. 8, Township Committee meeting did not express concern about the proposed number of affordable units, but the roughly 300 market-rate units listed in the agreement.

Stirling resident Geno Moschetti noted the township used “creative financing” in 2015 to partially fund the Kantor Park turf field through a lease agreement with Oratory Preparatory School in Summit. He asked if the township could find funding to “help offset the money the builders wouldn’t get if they didn’t build more expensive housing in conjunction with the affordable.”

“I’m asking you to look into rather than putting 100 units in to get 15, to put 15 in to get 15,” Moschetti continued. “If you’re obligated by the state to have to put a certain amount of affordable housing in here, why don’t we just put the affordable housing in and find out what kind of creative money is out there? I don’t know if there is, I’m asking.”

Committeeman Bruce Meringolo noted the construction of an affordable housing development like Lounsberry Meadow on Valley Road is not possible at this point.

“There is no money to build affordable housing for a municipality,” said Meringolo. “The way that Lounsberry Meadow was built was builders who built in this town contributed to a fund and then we took that money and we built Lounsberry Meadow with it. That fund doesn’t exist anymore, there’s no money in it, so we would basically have to borrow all that money to build another Lounsberry Meadow to meet the 15 that you’re looking for.”

Millington resident Kathy O’Leary noted in a Thursday, Nov. 9, email there is about \$135,000 in the affordable housing trust, which is “not a huge number,” she said, “but it is also not nothing.”

Moschetti asked if there is any grant money available, possibly from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Meringolo replied he is sure there are “some nickels and dimes, but not the amount of money that it would take to build a number of affordable housing units.”

Deputy Mayor Brendan Rae noted the township would have to buy the property and then find a not-for-profit company to build the units. He said the alternative is something to be considered for the fourth round, but cannot be done in the short term. Long Hill is under the gun right now, he said, and risks “losing control of the town” if it loses its immunity from builder’s remedy lawsuits.

“What you’re suggesting is absolutely something that we can consider and we should consider, but that’s far down the road because it takes a long time to put together,” said Rae. “Right now we are under the spotlight. We’ve signed an agreement with Fair Share and we have obligations that we have to meet. And if we don’t meet them the consequences can certainly be dire for the township.”

Alternatives

O’Leary said later in the meeting there is money available to municipalities through tax credits. Township Attorney Jack Pidgeon said tax credits are out there, but Long Hill would be risking its immunity to be one of 300 towns in New Jersey alone looking for that money.

O’Leary noted the township could build all-affordable developments without having to buy the land if it works with certain developers who build affordable housing. She said she has introduced one such developer, who happens to be a Millington resident, to Township Committee members. Pidgeon said

Township Planner Jessica Caldwell has met with some of those developers, and generally they require the municipality to purchase the property and provide the infrastructure.

Rae said he met with the developer O’Leary referenced.

“We talked about it and he certainly said that it would require the town to front some of that, or to buy the property, to float money,” said Rae. “The other part of it, as the conversation progressed, he said this is probably something that you can’t do in the short term because it really does get a lot of competition for these resources. It takes time to put together and it’s certainly not something for the situation that’s facing the town at the moment.

“For future rounds, because of the time limitations, it’s certainly something that we should and could consider, and that’s certainly something that we would, but it doesn’t solve the problem that we have in front of us right now.”

Developers looking to sue a municipality like Long Hill, Pidgeon added, are not going to wait around while the township looks for other means to provide affordable housing. He noted objectors will be present at the fairness hearing arguing on behalf of developers that Long Hill’s settlement does not do enough to provide affordable housing.

O’Leary said she has been discussing alternatives with the committee for a year, and will continue to do so.

“I’ll follow up with people I know and we’ll keep talking about this,” she said.

O’Leary also mentioned a proposal by JMF Properties to construct 82 luxury apartments on the west end of Railroad Avenue in Stirling. The proposal does not include any affordable units, she said.

She informed the committee the proposal was made to the Planning Board’s Application Review Committee, though none of the Township Committee members had heard of it.

“A lot of things come through the application subcommittee that never rise to the level of the full board,” said Rae, who sits on the Planning Board.

Retail

Along with Moscetti and O’Leary, Meyersville resident Olga Argunova said she would prefer to see one or two all-affordable developments in town rather than four larger projects.

Moscetti also asked why Long Hill would have to provide retail space in the developments. He noted there are already several vacant storefronts around town.

Preliminary proposals for both the [Tifa property on Division Avenue in Millington](#) and the [redevelopment zone on Valley Road](#) near Main Avenue in Stirling call for retail on the first floor and apartments above.

In response to Moscetti’s question, committee members responded the township does not have to include retail in the projects.

Meringolo clarified there is retail in the redevelopment zone proposal because the properties are located in the Stirling flood zone, so residences cannot be built on the first floor. Elite Properties, the designated redeveloper of the site, is [currently seeking State Department of Environmental Protection \(DEP\) approval](#) to build residences in a flood zone.

“We’re looking at limiting the retail,” Meringolo said of Elite’s proposal, “maybe putting a parking garage or something like that around back – those kinds of things so that there’s no residential in wetlands.”

Meringolo noted any plan is subject to township approval and discussion in public meetings, but the process has not yet reached that point.

Thank You,

*Ahmed Naga
Commanding Officer
Long Hill Township Police Department
264 Mercer Street, Stirling, N J 07980
Office: 908-647-4953*

