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GUY PISERCHIA

Long Hill Mayor to those irked by affordable housing law: 'We agree'

- By ALEX PARKER-MAGYAR Editor
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LONG HILL TWP. - The [Township Committee](#) isn't pleased with the institution of state affordable housing mandates, either.

Mayor Guy Piserchia addressed residents at the Wednesday, Feb. 28, Township Committee meeting in response to comments made at a Planning Board meeting the prior evening.

The board had discussed bulk requirements for three of the four sites to be re-zoned for multi-family housing as per the [township's tentative settlement](#) with the Fair Share Housing Center advocacy group. The respective lot sizes dictate that developments at the Tifa property on Division Avenue, a five-acre vacant lot across from the post office in Gillette, and eight acres on Warren Avenue would have to include three-story buildings to accommodate the number of housing units prescribed for those properties, according to board professionals.

The board will, however, seek to impose a maximum of two stories for buildings that front on Division Avenue at Tifa, or Valley Road in the case of the Gillette lot.

Resident Joe Ferrandino, who recently moved from Brooklyn, N.Y., to Stirling, said he would be on “the first bus out of here” if he saw three-story buildings.

“I resent the fact that you’re calling this an agreement or somehow or another we had a choice,” said Ferrandino. “See, that would be concord. This is coercion. This is the state telling us that our property rights that are no longer ours.

“I moved from the concrete jungle with the towering apartment buildings and whatnot to come here to this quaint, little town, and that you’re discussing three-story buildings already upsets me to no end.”

Piserchia, who as mayor sits on the Planning Board, was present for Ferrandino’s remarks. The next night, at the Township Committee meeting, he said the message resonated with him.

“I just want to speak to all the residents, and I know I speak for everybody up here – we agree,” he said. “It’s wrong, we’re not happy with the decision that was made. Unfortunately, we have to play the ball as it lies. That’s what was dictated to us.”

He noted he sits on the bipartisan legislative committees for both the League of Municipalities and the New Jersey Conference of Mayors, in addition to the Morris County executive board, each of which connects him with municipal officials from elsewhere in the state.

“This is not just Long Hill Township,” he said. “It’s not big town, it’s not small town, it’s not Republican, it’s not Democrat, it’s not affluent, it’s not middle class – almost certainly every town in New Jersey is frustrated with what has happened.”

‘Remarkable Achievement’

He said Long Hill got a good deal on its affordable housing obligation when one compares it to what the township was initially faced with.

Fair Share Housing Center initially projected the township’s “unmet need” at 314 affordable units, he noted, but the township settled for an obligation of either 54 or 72 affordable units, depending on whether the apartments are rentals or for sale. The ‘either-or’ obligation is a result of third round affordable housing rules, which dictate that 15 percent of rental units must be set aside as affordable housing, or 20 percent of for-sale units.

Applying the 15-percent set-aside to the initial figure of 314 units would mean 2,100 total new units, he said. Instead, the township is required to zone for 220 total units.

He credited Township Attorney John Pidgeon and Township Planner Jessica Caldwell for negotiating with Fair Share Housing Center to bring the number down. Referring to a municipality’s lack of leverage in such negotiations, he compared it to sitting down at the table with a pen, “and the person you’re negotiating with has a gun.”

“There’s a reason we ended up where we are,” the mayor said. “We went from 314 units down to 54 of rental, which frankly is a remarkable achievement, considering what we were looking at. I don’t want people to think this was done haphazardly, it was an awful lot of work over the course of the last year.”

Communicating With Residents

Piserchia [responded to residents](#) who have [called for the Tifa property to be removed from the settlement](#), saying the township would be putting itself in a dangerous position.

“If we don’t re-zone the Tifa property what ends up happening is the agreement falls apart and that 314 number comes back into play,” he said.

He noted the settlement, approved in State Superior Court in Morristown in December, “preempts anything we can do at this point.”

Township Committeeman Brendan Rae asked Pidgeon if the township ever truly had a choice to keep Tifa out of the settlement. The attorney responded the property was in Fair Share’s sights from the beginning.

“The Tifa site has been in the Master Plan for mixed-use, including affordable housing, at a density of 12 units per acre since 1996,” he said. “The second thing is Fair Share Housing, that was their prime location that they wanted us to re-zone, because it’s near a train station.”

Piserchia said the township should create a tab on its website detailing the ongoing process.

“I don’t know if we’ve done as good a job over the last few months as we could have in getting this information out to the residents,” he said, “but I think it’s important to get that information out now. Because sometimes in a vacuum, and especially with social media today, there are things that are posted – sometimes well-meaning, other times maybe not so much – but a lot of it is inaccurate.”

Piserchia later said he agrees with Fair Share Housing Center’s intent, though Committeeman Cornel Schuler added the process is what is broken.

“The Fair Share approach, like you said, their heart is in the right place, but to me the formula is just extremely messed up,” said Schuler. “It’s not a formula about assuring how much affordable housing you have, it’s a formula about forcing growth. Like you said earlier, you’re negotiating at a table where you have a pencil and the other guy has a gun. You’ve really got no choice about it.

“So I’m angry that we have to do 54 new things because we’re pretty good on our existing affordable stock, but at the same time I’m ecstatic that it’s only 54 and it’s not 300.”

Thank You,

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