

To the Editor:

Here in Holland Township, New Jersey, many residents are up in arms about our township officials trying to push through a plan that would designate 1.5 square miles of Holland as a Village Center, stretching along Route 519 from close to the border with Milford all the way to the top of the hill where the gas station stands on the corner of Hawk's Schoolhouse Road. Township residents will have a chance to learn more at a meeting scheduled for next Tuesday, April 25.

This plan for a Village Center on Steroids (it's 50 percent bigger than the state criteria allow) has been developed with a minimum of public participation. The township's planner has admitted that center designation would allow the township to rezone lots within the proposed center for higher density than currently allowed, even if the lot owner were opposed. And worse yet, asking for this Village Center could open the township to the danger of lawsuits by developers seeking to overturn the current one-acre zoning within most of the proposed center.

"Involving the public in every step of the Plan Endorsement process is critical." That's what it says at the top of page 12 of the state Guidelines for Plan Endorsement. What don't Holland officials understand about that simple sentence? It appears that they have done their best to cut the public out of any meaningful participation in our Plan Endorsement process.

The recommendation for a Village Center is contained in Holland's draft Petition for Plan Endorsement. The Petition claims on page 15 that Holland was required to obtain some form of center designation when we received certification of our affordable housing plan back in December 2004. All during 2005, we had plenty of time to form the committee with wide representation from the community that the state guidelines recommend. Instead, we apparently did nothing last year, and now we have to rush to make a December 2006 deadline. We're being told there just isn't time to do things the right way, with significant participation by the citizens. But isn't that the fault of Holland officials who did nothing for over a year?

At the Monday, April 10, Holland planning board meeting, in a surprise item that wasn't even on the agenda issued the previous Friday, the board chairman announced that he was forming a special subcommittee to look at Plan Endorsement. Again ignoring the spirit of the state guidelines, this subcommittee will have no members of the general public. Instead, it's stacked with municipal officials from the Township Committee and the planning board. They've also cancelled a second public hearing on Plan Endorsement, promised at the first hearing on March 13.

The subcommittee meeting will be held on Tuesday, April 25, at 7 p.m. at the Holland Township Municipal Building. I urge all Holland residents to attend, especially those whose property falls within the boundaries of the proposed center. Representatives of the N.J. Office of Smart Growth, the folks who will receive Holland's Petition, will be on hand to answer questions. It's not clear how (or even if) the public will be allowed to participate, but a large turnout will at least ensure that the folks from the state see that Holland citizens have concerns. Concerns about what's being done and how it's being done.

So that citizens can be informed on this important issue, our citizens group has posted the map of the proposed Village Center, the draft Petition for Plan Endorsement, the state guidelines, a link to the state criteria for a Village Center, and other relevant materials on our Web site: www.hollandhighlands.org

Why should residents within the proposed Village Center be concerned? At the least because the town can rezone once a center is designated by the state. On page 7, the Petition talks about plans for the Galloway Farm, on the corner of Routes 519 and 614. The Petition says the township is considering rezoning the property from the current one house on five acres to allow "up to twelve new dwellings, six (6) of which would be market-priced age restricted units and six (6) of which would be non-age restricted affordable rental units," with the existing farmhouse remaining a two-family dwelling. That's 14 dwelling units on a lot that is now zoned for one house on five acres.

But it doesn't necessarily stop there. At the March 29, 2005, planning board meeting, township planner Elizabeth McKenzie said, "But there might be other parcels in the center that might be appropriate for this sort of development that they—that the Township might want to look at down the road, depending on how they feel about the success of this. In other words, it's not—the idea would be that if it works it may be a good mechanism that we might want to do elsewhere within the center." Those are her exact words from the stenographic transcript.

She's clearly saying that if this plan to put apartments, including affordable housing, on the Galloway Farm works out, the township might rezone other properties within the Village Center for higher density. After all, the state criteria for a Village Center say there should be plans for a minimum of three dwelling units per acre. People who live in the neighborhood of homes on one-acre lots all along Route 519 in Holland could someday find themselves staring out the window at a large apartment complex looming next door.

Even more disturbing, Holland officials and our planner seem to be under the illusion that they can control this "opportunity" to rezone that they are creating. They ignore the potential for the courts to intervene.

Consider this scenario. After the Village Center has been approved, a developer buys four adjacent homes on one-acre lots in the Village Center. He can afford

to pay a premium because he intends to tear down the current small homes and build five apartments on each lot. The Holland planning board turns down his proposal to build twenty apartments on four acres, saying the land is zoned for one unit per acre.

So the developer takes the planning board to court. He tells the judge that he has enough water because Holland has implemented a policy under which he can “rent” water rights from a large property contiguous to his lots on the edge of the Village Center. Holland still has 35,000 gallons a day of spare sewer capacity. And most important, Holland has petitioned the state, willingly asking for a Village Center designation, indicating that we welcome growth, knowing that the state standard says we plan a minimum of three dwelling units per acre.

Don't you think there's a good chance that the judge will allow those twenty apartments to be built? Isn't there reason to fear that Holland officials are setting up a situation that could quickly spin out of their control?

If you're a Holland resident and this concerns you, I hope you'll inform yourself through the materials on our Web site. Then drag yourself away from “American Idol” and show up at the Plan Endorsement subcommittee meeting next Tuesday, April 25, at 7 p.m. The future of our rural community could well be at stake.

Michael Keady, President
Friends of Holland Highlands

908 995 2536