

Opinion

Do Holland residents want 'Village Center'?

To the Editor:

"The scenic beauty that characterizes Holland Township is a rare resource that is, in every sense, nonrenewable and worthy of protection." (Holland Township Draft Report for Initial Plan Endorsement Application, McKenzie, Elizabeth, February 2006).

The statement sounds idyllic doesn't it? Now consider taking a mile and a half square and converting it to a density of five houses per acre or 7,200 dwellings. That density is being considered as a criterion for certain "receiving districts" within the Highlands Planning Area. Holland Township lies in both the Highlands Preservation Area and the Highlands Planning Area. The Highlands Council will be seeking locations to absorb growth within the Planning Areas, which covers most of Holland Township. Those places include municipalities with designated "centers." Is that density the scenic beauty the residents of Holland Township contemplate for the future?

At its March meeting, the Holland Township Planning Board is expected to convene a public hearing regarding the inclusion of the very type of "center" which may then become a Highlands receiving district.

The Planning Board is considering putting forth a petition for State Plan Endorsement with an area designated as a "Village Center." The limits of this center (as indicated on map supplied to Hunterdon County) extend from above Hawks Schoolhouse Road to a point nearly a mile south of the Route 614-Route 519 intersection, west of 519 in varying depths up to about 3,000 feet and east of Route 519 north of Route 614 of varying depths again up to about 3,000 feet. The concept, as outlined in the document Holland Township Draft Report for Initial Plan Endorsement Application, (available at the township building), is that the designated center area would be to "encourage" future growth with the remaining areas outside of the center designated as receiving density reductions.

"It is the intention of the Township to reduce the gross density of development permitted in the outlying areas while also providing incentives to promote the use of creative development alternatives that will protect environmentally sensitive areas and scenic vistas, encourage development within the Village Center and facilitate the redevelopment of vacant industrial buildings." (Holland Township Draft Report for Initial Plan Endorsement Application, McKenzie, Elizabeth, February 2006).

According to the township planner's presentation during the February Planning Board meeting, the nearly square mile and a half area to be encumbered by the "Village Center" designation is currently almost built-out at a density of approximately one unit per acre.

If the area under consideration as a center is largely developed, why do we need a "Village Center?" Since the area is nearly "built-out," a center designation will encourage redevelopment to a higher density. Developers might couple up properties and propose increasing the existing density upwards to the five apartments, rental properties or owner occupied units per acre until all available sewerage capacity is consumed; thus substantially altering the character of the established neighborhoods. The statement in the township planner's publications suggest the Township is desiring to "encourage growth" yet it appeared at the February Planning Board meeting that the public prefers to limit growth.

The designated center is not only potentially open to the Highlands "receiving district" criterion but also to the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan Criteria for a "Village Center." Here are a few of those guidelines:

- It has (or is planned for) a minimum gross population density of

5,000 people per square mile (excluding water bodies) and a minimum gross housing density of three dwelling units per acre

- It is (or is planned to be) primarily a mixed-residential community with a compact Core of mixed-uses (for example, commercial, resource-based industrial, office, cultural) offering employment, basic personal and shopping services and community activities for residents of the Village and its environs.

- It has a land area of less than one square mile.

(State Plan and Redevelopment Plan, NJDCA, Office of Smart Growth)

Why would Holland Township want to further encourage growth in established neighborhoods which are either built-out under the current zoning, or nearly built-out, thus limiting future density?

The promotion of an unnecessary "center" designation is directly attributable to the excessive inclusionary development planned for the Galloway farmstead. This proposal is to develop the 4.8 net acre former Galloway property on the corner of Route 614 and Route 519, the busiest and most prominent intersection within Holland Township, with at least 14 market rate rentals, affordable rental apartments and age-restricted units. The former Galloway farmstead is currently zoned as R-5 (5-acre minimum, single-family) and was previously utilized by the same developer as a portion of a lot-averaging subdivision where the developer received a density bonus. The Galloway proposal requires a zone change allowing for an excessive density which negatively impacts not only its surroundings but leads to the greater context of managing future growth within Holland Township.

While no decision has been rendered by the Township Committee regarding the proposed Galloway zone change; the consideration of designating a much larger area of Holland Township as a "Village Center" further encourages higher density developments such as the Galloway proposal. Although the Galloway farmstead is privately owned, isn't the historic and scenic context of the Galloway property a significant nonrenewable resource? How does the encouraged density resulting from a "Village Center" designation protect those identified resources of the township within the defined center? The very resources that the draft report stipulates need protection.

The proposed development at the intersection of Route 614 and Route 519 illustrates the pitfalls of the "center designation."

While some nonresidential facilities exist within the designated area, will enough demand exist within the region to result in further growth of those uses here without detrimental impacts to the existing surrounding villages, or are these types of uses better suited to the real villages making those existing villages more vibrant? Those communities have an existing sense of place that represents real villages and centers such as continuous storefronts, mixed uses, small scale walking environments. We should not destroy those villages for the sake of a perceived need to have those features in every township.

These questions require the public to help direct the Planning Board.

The Plan Endorsement process encourages the public to participate; this is the future of the township. I am advocating Holland Township residents seek out the information and help the Planning Board and the township understand that a "center" designation is not the desires of the community. A "Village Center" designation is not a necessary aspect of the Master Plan, nor should it be included as a portion of the Plan Endorsement. The "center designation" encourages unnecessary growth at the expense of township resources.

During the February Planning Board meeting, it was indicated that a public hearing for the Plan Endorsement and the "Village Center" would be tentatively scheduled for the March 13 meeting at the Municipal Building. The Plan Endorsement process does not require numerous hearings, I urge the residents to attend the meetings. Please check with the Planning Board Secretary (995-0057) to confirm the agenda and review the reports and maps.

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