

To the Editor:

Currently, the only State-designated center in Hunterdon County is the Borough of Flemington. According to Flemington's official website, the Borough encompasses 1.3 square miles while the proposed Holland Township "Village Center" is slated to be nearly 1.5 square miles. Why is a rural community, in close proximity to an existing village, considering a center larger than the County seat?

The Holland Township Revised Draft Report for Initial Plan Endorsement Application, (McKenzie, March 2006), indicates the center's purpose is for "*concentrating most of the Township's future growth in the Village Center.*" However, during the February Planning Board meeting, it was also indicated that the area imposed with the center is nearly built out. In order to accommodate the future "encouraged growth", either an eventual expansion of the center would be required or rezoning of properties within the center must be accomplished to accommodate higher densities. Therefore, designating an excessive center allows greater opportunity for the Municipality or a developer to rezone on the basis of meeting the goals and objectives of the State Development and Redevelopment Plan. While center designation leads to encouraging or "accommodating" growth in a specified area, it also impacts individual property owner's rights.

The State guidelines for a village center designation stipulate a minimum density of 3 units per acre, a much higher density than exists across the center area today. The designation supporting higher densities will restrict the ability of a property owner or the Municipality, to fend off detrimental rezoning requests or a rezoning against the property owner's will. The State-supported growth reduces the ability of a property owner to justify the current density against an unreasonable development since the premise of a center is to encourage and accommodate growth. A recent court decision regarding Sussex County center designations noted that development in centers still needs to adhere to environmental regulations, but it indicates that centers are appropriate for growth. While the current administration may not intend to degrade property owner rights, the center designation appears to provide that potential for all of us in the center.

The March 13th Holland Township Planning Board meeting was focused on the Township's Plan Endorsement Petition and the inclusion of the Township's request for a center designation. While the required minimum legal notification appeared in this newspaper, I find it disappointing that it largely took public open letters, to inform the public of such far reaching decisions, which affect the entire community. The public attendance exceeded the seating in the room (125 citizens, according to the March 13th Planning Board Minutes) and although limited, the public was offered an opportunity to question and speak to the future planning of the township. Varying opinions, along with significant concerns were brought forward regarding the inclusion of a "Village Center" within Holland Township's Petition. Of the 24 residents that spoke, the majority were not supportive of the concept. The State Plan Endorsement process calls for transparency and communication between the citizenry and the decision makers.

The intent of including the public in the planning process is clearly expressed within the “Plan Endorsement Guidelines” prepared by state agencies in 2004. In fact, page 12 of those guidelines states, “*Involving the public in every step of the Plan Endorsement process is critical.*” Those guidelines outline a specific panel of committee members including; “*a representative from the governing body, the planning board, the board of adjustment, the Board of Education, the sewerage authority, several members representing diverse interests, such as social, economic, housing, environmental, agricultural, and where applicable the Environmental and the Historic Preservation Commissions.*” It further recommends the committee’s purpose is “*to prepare the initial petition on behalf of the governing body.*” (Plan Endorsement Guidelines, NJDCA, NJSPC, OSG, 2004). The public’s participation at the March 13<sup>th</sup> meeting identified concerns requiring both further investigation and additional input from the community. A diverse committee, as recommended within the Plan Endorsement Guidelines, affords greater opportunity for dialog with different aspects of the community. The diversity of such a committee furthers the overall community’s vision, not a select group’s vision.

This publicly-involved approach does not seem to be the course of action chosen by the Township. A last-minute added agenda item at the April 10<sup>th</sup> Planning Board meeting included a brief discussion and the appointing of a Planning Board sub-committee for the Plan Endorsement Petition. Along with the appointment of a subcommittee, a meeting was scheduled for the subcommittee to discuss the Plan Endorsement Petition with members of the Office of Smart Growth. The meeting is scheduled for April 25<sup>th</sup> at 7pm at the municipal building. It was unclear whether the public will be offered an opportunity to speak and ask questions, but it is intended to be open to the public. The board also indicated that there might not be any further public hearings regarding the Plan Endorsement, contrary to the March 13<sup>th</sup> meeting.

The governing body has an opportunity to include the community through the establishment of the recommended Plan Endorsement Committee rather than solely assigning the task to the Planning Board. The committee’s goal would be to prepare a Plan Endorsement Petition, which more closely reflects the public’s vision for the future.

The Plan Endorsement process does not require numerous hearings. The attendance at the March 13<sup>th</sup> hearing was encouraging, and the public needs to continue attending the meetings and participating at the hearings. The April 25<sup>th</sup> sub-committee meeting, which is replacing a second public hearing, appears to be the last opportunity for the public to participate in the Township’s consideration of a village center designation. Public information regarding Plan Endorsement as well as center designation is available on the following website, [www.hollandhighlands.org](http://www.hollandhighlands.org).

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