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Dover Knolls Project Nears DEIS Deadline; Many Impacts, Little Time

By Stephen Kaye

What Dover Plains residents call the largest development ever in Dutchess County has completed its DEIS hearings June 3 leaving Dover's citizens wondering whether the Town Board represents them or the developer.

Politics in Dover has been all about a mega-sized project for the redevelopment of the Harlem Valley Psychiatric facility left vacant by the State in 1994. That project is now a plan for developing 900 acres with 1376 new units covering most of the buildable land on two parcels. In 2007 a majority of the town board shifted to a slate that ran on a platform of "let's get this plan done and the project started". Shortly after the board took office they started moving the Benjamin Company's plan forward, declared themselves lead agency and have moved as fast as procedures permitted. The draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) was deemed accepted April 29, and was made available to the public on May 15. The first hearing took place on May 30 and the second and last on June 3. Many residents claim they had scant opportunity to read it and no opportunity to hire qualified experts to comment on the many complex and controversial points. Moreover, only selections of the DEIS, and some estimates say it's 4000 pages, were made available on the town website. Written comment of the DEIS will be accepted until June 30.

Background

The Wingdale facility, which once housed 5,000 patients and had 5,000 employees, covers 83 buildings, a

10 acre reservoir, a water treatment plant, a wastewater treatment plant, a building once housing a power plant, forested hills-part of the Taconic chain-and several hundred acres of good flat land (including a nine hole golf course) adjoining the Great Swamp. For ten years after the closing the Harlem Valley Partnership tried to find a re-developer but failed. Finally the town approached The Benjamin Companies, a Garden City company that had a track record of redeveloping institutional properties, and a sale to that company was completed in 2003. After two years of discussion, the Benjamin Companies filed a development plan that was later withdrawn after it became obvious that board would insist on detailed environmental studies, adequate setbacks to protect bog turtles, and protection of steep slopes and critical environmental areas. The developer then claimed in a successful public relations campaign that the board and the company had reached an impasse, that the board had imposed unreasonable conditions and that no progress could be made with the then existing board. The 2007 election changed the composition of the board; the Benjamin Companies promptly re-applied; a series of 3-2 votes has hastened the approval process to this penultimate point.

Issues

For many of the residents, the main problem is how to deal with the empty buildings seen from Route 22 all containing asbestos or hazardous materials. Neither the timing nor the manner of the demolition was clarified in the DEIS, an omission that was commented on by members of the

Coalition for the Responsible Growth of Dover. Tonia Shoumatoff of the Housatonic Valley Association was concerned that blasting could produce toxic dust that would end up in the Great Swamp and on tributaries of the Housatonic River.

Water, always an issue with developments, has two main questions: where does it come from and where does it go? According to Alan Surman, a concerned citizen who lives on a farm overlooking the site, the existing water system relied principally on a ten acre reservoir that depends on a 65 foot dam, itself in need of repairs and a complex treatment plant that will need replacement and repairs. During time of draught, records indicate that up to 124 million gallons of supplemental water had to be pumped from the Swamp River. The developer proposes to drill wells and use ground water, but tests and records indicate that there is buried debris including transformers from the old power station containing PCBs. A series of monitoring wells was recommended in a prior study Shuman found at Dutchess County Water and Wastewater Authority. Shuman testified at the DEIS hearing and suggested that the Ten Mile River serve as a backup to the Reservoir. In any case, Shuman, who has an engineering background, thought the DEIS was short on detail and on the cost of operating the water systems. He also mentioned that if the development proceeds on the land Benjamin owns, it will likely trigger development on adjoining lands, and the population increase will be greater than the 3,000 projected by Benjamin.

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Water Issue

In addition to the Dove Knolls development, Dover must also contend with a planned gas fueled power plant that expects to use 350,000 gallon of water a day for cooling. The total draw-down of these two projects will exceed 800,000 gallons a day, putting a strain on the water table, the river and the swamp. Alan Shuman also mentioned that the developer proposes to site houses up on the ridge, violating the rule that prevents building on slopes of greater than fifteen percent. Blasting for roads and house site will result in over one million cubic yards of material being removed from the ridges, destroying the forest cover and increasing the hazard of flooding.

Developer's Claims Being Challenged

The Benjamin Companies have been conducting a campaign extolling that economic benefits that will result if the town approves their plan. Their flyers, predicting 3,400 construction jobs and 1,120 permanent jobs, call their plan "a tremendous opportunity to create new jobs ... for Dover residents." There is, however, no plan for setting

Coalition for Responsible Growth, being challenged by their fiscal expert. Their water expert will weigh in on the issue that she calls "the least debatable", one that by itself should cause the town and the developer to scale back the proposal to a more reasonable size, remove housing from the steep slopes and deal with the demolition in an honest and forthright way.

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