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'Playing with fire:' Millington residents warn of building on Tifa site

- By ALEX PARKER-MAGYAR Editor
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LONG HILL TWP. - The moment the first shovel breaks ground at the Tifa site, Millington resident John Bangs said, he's leaving.

Bangs and two other Millington residents attended the Tuesday, Feb. 27, Planning Board meeting to express concerns about asbestos and other hazardous materials located on the Division Avenue site.

The township is under court order to re-zone the site for multi-family housing per the terms of its tentative settlement with the Fair Share Housing Center advocacy group, which was approved in Morris County Superior Court in December. The township has until mid-June to re-zone the property and three other sites to comply with the agreement.

The Planning Board discussed bulk standards for three of the four sites at the meeting, prior to a nearly hour-long public comment period that was almost entirely focused on Tifa contamination.

Responding to residents' concerns, Planning Board professionals and board members stressed site cleanup would be under the jurisdiction of the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), not the township. Nothing can be built there, they said, unless the cleanup is up to DEP standards, which are among the most stringent in the country. That process is still several months away, at least, as lot owner Prism Capital Partners does not plan to submit an application until after the site is re-zoned.

'Playing With Fire'

Bangs, addressing the board, claimed exposure to chemicals from the site has resulted in an unusually high rate of rare cancers in his neighborhood. He said the entire property, not just the asbestos dump Superfund site at its rear, should be closed to the public as a toxic waste dump.

If housing is built on the site, he said, the township should be concerned about lawsuits from residents exposed to contaminants. Prism could also avoid a multi-million dollar cleanup cost by declaring bankruptcy in the future, he warned, sticking the township with the bill.

"You're playing with fire," he said. "You're playing in the devil's sandbox."

Millington resident Charles Arentowicz brought with him a set of photos which he claimed show asbestos flying through the air after sewer line work in the Tifa parking lot in May 2015. The emergency pipe repair – which a private contractor completed without a permit, he said – earned both the contractor and the township a reprimand from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

A subsequent EPA inspection found pieces of broken tile comprised of 35 percent asbestos, he said, reading from the EPA report. The capped asbestos Superfund site west of the Tifa buildings is under the protection of the federal agency.

Arentowicz told the Planning Board members it is their responsibility to “protect human health and the environment.”

“Any developer that seeks to develop this property will have to comply with any entity, whether it’s the state entity, the DEP, or whether it’s the federal entity (the EPA),” responded Planning Board Attorney Yolanta Maziarz. “Any developer who chooses to develop this property with any type of use, especially residential use, is going to have to comply with all mechanisms to create a safe environment for people living in residential apartments.”

In response to comments from Millington resident Kathy O’Leary, Planning Board member Don Richardson said he has seen throughout the state cases of developers improving the quality of contaminated sites.

“The site has not been well cared for throughout the years,” said Richardson, the president of an environmental consulting and remediation firm. “There is a new owner now that has mandatory and other obligations that should a development take place, actually might expedite some of the cleanup that I think everybody’s seeking, and would be protecting the public health and the environment.”

When an application comes before the board, Maziarz said, the township is going to be invested in the details of the cleanup.

“At this point,” she said, “it’s premature to even talk about that because all we’re talking about (tonight) is what density we’re establishing.”

O’Leary responded the Planning Board is “sticking its head in the sand,” not worrying about how many people would be living on top of TCE and other dangerous chemicals.

Maziarz reiterated a developer would have to “jump through every hoop” set by the DEP.

“They’re going to have to use their own money to clean up this site,” she said, “and the township will be involved at that point because there will have been a concrete plan presented to the township, and there hasn’t been.”

Thank You,

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