

The Bernardsville News

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THURSDAY, JUNE 29, 2006

75 Cents

Land Conservancy salutes volunteers • 13



An inside look at the Bernards High School expansion • 4

Bernardsville officials OK new rental housing law • 5



Photos by Debbie Weisman

Ridge High School graduate Grace Kung, left, along with mom, Elaine, celebrate during commencement ceremonies at the school in Basking Ridge Friday night.

Ridge High Class of 2006 recalls past, eyes future

By W. JACOB PERRY
STAFF WRITER

BERNARDS TWP. — Ridge High School's new graduates



'Green' housing replaces church

Buyer of Baptist tract plans 14-lot subdivision

By W. JACOB PERRY
STAFF WRITER

BERNARDS TWP. — A Mine Brook Road site that was once eyed for a large, controversial church project may instead yield a group of homes designed to harness the environment.

A contract purchaser of the 88.9-acre Millington Baptist Church tract presented the Planning Board last Tuesday, June 20, with conceptual plans to build 14 homes in a unique, "green" way.

Anthony V. Sblendorio of Basking Ridge, principal of Back to Nature Landscape Associates of Tewksbury Township, told the board that the vacant tract was under contract to Ecological Solutions for Mine Brook Road, LLC, which he described as a partnership between himself and Hampshire Management Co. of Morristown.

Sblendorio said his group was looking to develop sites in harmony with nature by having unique layouts, constructing structures in simple, traditional

ways, and handling drainage through natural means.

"You can imagine cookie-cutter homes or a place looking like a farmstead that's been there for many years," he said, showing a slide display. "It could look great from the road and be very ecologically responsible."

With the tract being zoned for three-acre housing, Sblendorio said his group might seek relief to create lots of less than three acres, although he distinguished the idea from cluster housing.

"We're looking to be creative in setting things further back," he said. "This is not cluster housing at all."

Board members, who were asked for their input on whether the concept was worth pursuing as a formal development application, gave their blessing.

"I look forward to the ideas," said Board Chairman Scott Spitzer. "But how subdivisions appear from the road is important to me in terms of trade-offs. The sightlines along Mine Brook Road are important."

Board member Bert Fonde

was also encouraging. "I like your approach," he said. "I think you're on the right track."

Ecological Solutions hopes to develop a tract that bedeviled Millington Baptist for years.

Millington Baptist, located at Valley and King George roads, acquired the tract in the late 1990s with the intent of building a new, large church and leaving its existing, cramped facilities on King George Road.

The plans, presented to the Planning Board in the fall of 1998, called for a 87,390-square-foot multi-use church with 1,200 seats, 21 classrooms for Sunday school and 403 paved parking stalls.

But neighboring residents from the township and Far Hills objected vehemently to the project's size and scope. Although the board approved a preliminary site plan in a 5-4 vote in August 1999, the project was delayed by two lawsuits and a need to obtain permits from the state Department of Environmental

PLEASE SEE GREEN, PAGE 2

Embattled coach quits

Coach quits after embattled season

GREEN: Buyer of Baptist church tract hopes to build 14 homes on site

FROM PAGE 1

Protection (DEP).

With the site being located outside the municipal sewer district, the DEP spent four-and-a-half years reviewing plans for a septic disposal field near the Dead River before granting a permit. In September 2004, the church filed an application for final site plan approval from the

Planning Board.

But the objectors inflicted a fatal blow last July 19 when they persuaded the board not to grant final approval because the filing occurred after the preliminary approval expired. That sent the project back to square one.

In March, church officials revealed that they had contracted to sell the tract but they declined

to identify the buyer, saying the deal was in a 90-day period for due diligence.

Active Locally

Both partners in Ecological Solutions are familiar locally. Sblendorio has lived in the township for nine years, while Hampshire, whose principals include Jeff Hanson of Bernardsville, has been involved

in several local redevelopment projects.

Those projects include the former Ridge Chevrolet-Oldsmobile site at 44 South Finley Ave., the former library building on Morristown Road in Bernardsville, and The Station Pub and Grub on Mine Brook Road in Bernardsville.

Within the last few months, Hampshire has also purchased The Bernards Inn on Mine Brook Road in Bernardsville, and Jerolaman's grocery store and liquors on Claremont Road in Bernardsville.

Sblendorio told the board he had found that some development projects do ecological damage long before a landscape architect is engaged. He said he and his partners realized they needed "to be brought earlier

into the process, to try to do something different."

He cited The Willow School, a four-year-old private school on Pottersville Road in Bedminster Township, as an example of what his group hopes to do. He said Back to Nature had also applied its ideas to a four-lot subdivision in Tewksbury Township known as Fern Valley.

He said the goals include, among other things, limiting impervious coverage, saving trees, and handling drainage through vegetative bio-swales as opposed to concrete pipes.

At the Mine Brook Road site, he said, percolation tests demonstrated that it could support 14 homes.

But he said he hoped to avoid a "standard cookie-cutter subdivision" with cul-de-sacs and con-

crete curbs. "It would be re-arranged in a more creative way, further from the road."

Fonde, however, questioned whether prospective buyers would accept smaller lots that might limit their ability to add "amenities."

Sblendorio didn't see a problem.

"We are seeing people downsize," he said. "Maybe this will stem the tide of building bigger. Again, we're only looking for a handful of people who want this lifestyle. It's not for everyone."

Spitzer, alluding to the past battle against the church project, advised Sblendorio to approach nearby neighbors about their ideas and concerns.

Sblendorio readily agreed, saying, "We're proud of what we do."

TURF: Officials review field work

FROM PAGE 1

a new field must be explained so the public understands it.

"People already ask me why build an \$800,000 field when we need classrooms," he said.

Superintendent of Schools Peter Miller assured Smoot that, despite their concerns, school officials were clearly interested in installing the turf, which can tolerate more use than a conventional grass field.

"Believe me, we really appreciate this. I get at least 100 calls a year about the condition of our field," he said.

Smoot in turn tried to assure officials.

"It won't be named Viagra Field," he said, although entities like "Coke and Pepsi would love to come in and get their name on the scoreboard."

In the end, the board opted to have its facilities and operations committee meet with Smoot to

discuss the issue further. The full board would then consider the committee's findings and recommendations.

Due to the summer hiatus, the board will not hold another public meeting until Aug. 23. However, because SHAFF wants to kick off its capital campaign this fall and install the field in September 2007, a special meeting may be scheduled before then to consider the matter.

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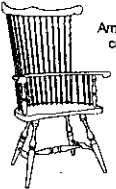
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COACH: Ridge hoops coach resigns

FROM PAGE 1

newspaper that he had raised the issue with the district.

On Monday, Ryan, whose sons played for the coach, declined to comment on the resignation.

Stead was also rehired on June 12 as a Ridge High special education teacher at an annual salary of \$68,775. That was part of a larger resolution that was approved unanimously.

Stead expressed doubt that he would return to Ridge as a teacher, saying he hopes to coach at another school.

Supporters of Stead, in letters

and phone calls to this newspaper, viewed his resignation as a troubling sign for other coaches.

"I believe the board has failed the students of Bernards Township," wrote Linette Hagaman of Manor Drive, a former board member whose son had Stead as a special education teacher. "All coaches and teachers involved in extra-curricular activities will now be on guard."

Ridge High Athletic Director Rich Shello, in an interview on Monday, saw a number of factors in coaching turnover.

"It's a very different climate in society in general than it was 20

years ago," he said. "Parents are very involved. They pay close attention to their kids and their athletic endeavors, but usually they're doing that in a very positive and supportive way."

"Coaches don't last as long as they used to, but the time you put in is different," he continued. He said that in addition to dealing more with parents, coaches also tend to be teachers who deal with parents in that role as well.

"It's difficult to balance all these things over a long period of time without being worn down," he said.

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