

Hamilton denies zoning change for CareOne

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HAMILTON -- In a decision more than two years and eight public hearings in the making, the township zoning board rejected the expansion of an assisted living facility on Whitehorse-Hamilton Square Road last night.

The 5-2 vote was heard by a crowd of more than 70 residents, the vast majority of whom applauded the decision and breathed a sigh of relief.

Residents of Hamilton's Society Hill II development, a 400-unit condominium complex located directly behind CareOne at Hamilton's current facility, had opposed a development that would have knocked down a swath of forest near their homes.

The company's application also asked for at least eight exceptions to the township's zoning code.

"I'm glad to see that they kept to the zoning board codes," said Al Sconza, a leader of the opposition. "My nerves have been on edge for the last two years."

Sconza, whose first-floor unit sits close to the CareOne facility, beamed after the board's vote and held up the holy water he said he had sprinkled on the trees near his backyard every Sunday for the last two years.

Other residents had tried different methods. Society Hill resident Susan Tierney had pored over CareOne's plans and spent months sending e-mails keeping residents aware of what were at least eight public hearings on the development.

"I feel relieved," Tierney said last night. "It really was all about the codes."

Dozens of residents wore neon stickers labeled "Enough Variances" or "REEL DC," an acronym for the group's name, "Residents for the Enforcement of Existing Land Development Codes."

CareOne had argued that a 62,000-square-foot expansion to the existing 58,000-square-foot facility would have provided a needed service and did not cause a detriment to the surrounding area.

The added wing would have accommodated 103 new beds and new space for Alzheimer's patients, but would have come as close as 15 feet to the property border with Society Hill. The required buffer is 150 feet.

"There's a reason why we have an ordinance, there's a reason why we have a master plan," said zoning board member Anthony Celentano. If the codes are set aside, "we might as well all go home."

Celentano joined members William Groom, Anthony DiStephano, Fred Dumont, and Richard Kellner in voting to deny CareOne's request for a use variance, effectively killing the company's application. Edward Arico and Ronald Luccarelli voted against the motion.

Groom voted by phone from Florida, punctuating what have been regarded as an unusual set of public hearings.

The board also denied CareOne's request to delay the vote once again because of management changes at the company.

"My understanding is" William Burris, a principal owner of CareOne who had worked closely with the expansion plans, "is no longer employed by CareOne," said Mark Roselli, an attorney representing the company.

In other business, the board delayed a hearing on Williams Trading Co.'s application to expand its Video XPress adult novelty store on Route 33 to the next scheduled meeting on July 14. That meeting will be held at Nottingham High School.

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