

Southampton Town Sends Sandy Hollow Apartments Back To The Drawing Board

The Southampton Town Board on Tuesday abruptly closed the public hearing on a controversial application for an apartment complex on Sandy Hollow Road in Tuckahoe—then shelved the proposal indefinitely while a panel of affordable housing experts examines alternatives.

In the wake of withering criticism of the project from residents of the neighborhoods surrounding the 2.6-acre parcel where the town's Housing Authority and a private developer have proposed constructing four buildings with a total of 34 one-bedroom and studio apartments, Supervisor Anna Throne-Holst announced last week that she would ask that the board's review of the proposal be halted, and had enlisted the panel to take an independent look at the design of the development.

On Tuesday night, she said the Town Board would also hold at least two public work sessions, on October 10 and 17, with the members of the panel to discuss the designs and the ideas for alternatives. She said the board would take the unusual step of allowing members of the public to offer input during those work sessions so that residents could have a role in the design of the project.

“We hear the neighborhood and the citizens loud and clear,” Ms. Throne-Holst said. “You have our assurance that we will move forward here very carefully.”

The panel includes Diana Weir—a former East Hampton Town councilwoman, former head of the Long Island Housing Partnership, and the commissioner of Housing and Human Service for Brookhaven Town—East Hampton Town Housing Director Tom Ruhle, builder John Barrows, Town Housing Authority board member Barbara Fair, and Town Councilwoman Bridget Fleming.

The panel met informally for the first time two weeks ago and will meet again this coming Tuesday to discuss the Sandy Hollow project. Ms. Throne-Holst said on Thursday, September 19, that she is going to ask that the public hearing on the current proposal for the project be closed until the panel can issue recommendations on the project scope, its financial viability, and whether rentals or ownership, or a mix of the two, would be the best approach to its use.

“We have asked them to take a look at the plan as currently proposed and get back to us whether that model is the only sustainable one or there are other ways to approach this,” Ms. Throne-Holst said at the Town Board's work session last Thursday. “[The panel] will look at other sizes of units, ownership or rental or all of the above. The developer-applicant is in agreement with this also.”

The town has been considering amending a planned development district zone change that was approved for the property in 2008, calling for the construction of a 16-unit condominium complex. The town's Housing Authority and a

private developer have proposed a partnership that would rearrange the interior designs of the originally planned buildings to create 34 one-bedroom and studio apartments, which would be built by the developer with the assistance of \$7 million in federal tax credits and managed by the Housing Authority.

Rents would be approximately \$950 a month, a price level the Housing Authority has said is sorely needed in the town for middle-income residents who cannot afford to buy homes. The redesign would not change the footprint of the four buildings substantially, but would nearly double the number of parking spaces required. The Housing Authority has said the new plans would result in only two more bedrooms in the development than the original and a total potential occupancy level lower than that of the condo development. The new plan also calls for an upgraded sewage treatment system.

A parade of neighbors have harangued the board for proposing the increase in individual units. They have seized on the use of a sewage treatment plant and the property's location on the edge of an environmentally sensitive area the town has targeted for preservation, as well as a host of legal details about the previous plans. Opponents have said that, at the very least, the change from condos to apartments should require that the original zone change process be started over.

On Tuesday night, despite the board's moves to take a new look at the plans, neighbors were adamant that they did not think the Sandy Hollow property was the place for the project.

"We're not against you, we're for you, and I think what you're doing now is great," said area resident Christina Stubelek, making clear that she still opposed the use of the Sandy Hollow property for affordable housing. "Thinking out of the box might be moving this development to a better location."

Other opponents asked that the neighbors be allowed to have representatives on the advisory panel as well.

"We have asked for three members of this community to be on the committee," said Noelle Bailly, in a heated exchange with Ms. Throne-Holst. "Regardless of your political alliance, you've left us all one way to vote this coming election, and that is to vote you out. I own a home in this community—you do not. You do not have a vested interest in this community, and it's not because you can't afford it."

Supporters of the project have said that the need for young and elderly residents to find affordable housing in the community trumps the concerns of those who live next door and may be influenced more by concerns about the type of tenants than about the impacts of the project design itself.

"I'm beginning to get the feeling that a lot of the opposition to this is a class issue more than anything else," said Dr. John Strong. "We need to provide housing for our workers. We're not talking about unemployed people, we're not talking about criminals. We're talking about working people who need to have a place to stay in our area, and this opens up that opportunity."

Neighbor Stanley Fayman took exception to the implication that the opposition was rooted in concerns about tenants. "When somebody makes the implication that this is class warfare, that's what seems to be an undercurrent of people calling others names, like NIMBYs," he said. "These are not people who are against affordable housing. These are the people that need workmen. But to keep denying that this isn't an issue of density ... it's the density, stupid—that's what this is about.

"Make a plan that works—this is not a Gordian knot," he added. "This can be untied."