

2006 CFE Newsletter

Saddle Ridge Developers, LLC Coming to a Neighborhood Near You

While the Easton Planning and Zoning and the Conservation Commissions were still deliberating the environmental and health and safety issues associated with the Running Brook affordable housing application, two long-time Easton residents were filing an application to the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection for another intense development, this time in the northern three acre watershed area of town.

Bucky Stone of 895 Sport Hill Road and Bob Carlson of 68 Soundview Drive, under the name Saddle Ridge Developers, LLC, have filed an application for a permit to construct septic facilities to accommodate a 112 unit residential development on 114 acres. The planned residential community proposed for the property is bordered by Bibbins, Cedar Hill, and Silver Hill Roads, continuing down Sport Hill Road to the intersection of Routes 136 and 59, and extending down Route 136 back to Bibbins Road. Access to the development would be from Cedar Hill Road and Sport Hill Road in the heart of Easton, across the street from the historic cemetery and 19th century Baptist Church.

Easton has been bombarded by applications from developers from outside of town who have wanted to break our town's one and three acre zoning for a number of years, but this is the first application by two "of our own," members of our community, former volunteers on school renovation and building committees, with families who live here.

The application clearly states that "the activity will potentially affect the Aspetuck and Easton Reservoirs." For a town which provides water to the surrounding communities through its three reservoirs: Hemlock, Aspetuck and Easton Lakes, this is a very serious breach of faith. Our three acre zoning conceived in the 1940's was established specifically to protect the lands surrounding the reservoirs and those lands draining indirectly into the reservoirs. This is simply a public health issue.

But what's harder for Easton residents to understand is the clear disrespect this application shows for the majority of residents who have been so careful to protect their community. Our farmers have tried many creative techniques: pick-your-own-orchards, Christmas tree farms and the like to maintain our rural charm and traditional zoning.

If you think this is a single attempt in an isolated location to break zoning, think again. If successful, the economics will entice others to try the same wherever the acreage allows. Though Mr. Stone could choose to develop his land in accordance with our three acre zoning laws, he has chosen to attempt to break zoning in order to achieve the greatest monetary benefit, and others will follow.

If you care about preserving the community in which you live call Mr. Stone at 268-3274 or Mr. Carlson at 373-9865 or write to them at their addresses mentioned above and let them know how you feel. Also e-mail or write letters to the Commissioner of the DEP, Gina McCarthy (gina.mccarthy@po.state.ct.us) and the DEP engineer assigned to the case Warren Herzig (warren.herzig@po.state.ct.us) at the DEP, 79 Elm Street, Hartford, CT 06106-5127 and tell them about your concerns for the public water supply.

The Easton Board of Selectmen has been very proactive in their concern for this application. They have appropriated funds to hire consultants to fight this on the town level when the applications are filed in town. The public has a right to a public hearing once the DEP has issued a preliminary report if there are a minimum of 25 signatures on a petition. The petition can be signed at the Easton Village Store or at the home of Adele O'Kane, 48 Bibbins Road.

It is important that all the citizens of Easton unite in their opposition to this application and show up in force at every hearing. Citizens for Easton will keep you informed of the process and where and when the meetings are being held. Please join us in preserving the current zoning in Easton.

A Delay Can Be a Saving Grace...

With finalization of the master plan delayed due to the Planning and Zoning Commission's focus on the Running Brook Farm application, new concerns have arisen in town, prompting renewed recognition of the need to establish policies protective of Easton's characteristic features.

New England is rich with Native American sites and Easton resident and archaeologist David Silverglade is eager for

the town to make use of the regulatory language available to investigate, and preserve wherever possible, sites of historic and archaeological significance. “These historic sites have direct relevance to the lives of people living in Easton today. They are valuable in helping us to appreciate our human, cultural and social environment – who we are and where we came from.” He would like to see the establishment of a “Historical and Archaeological Resources Commission” that would utilize a number of regulatory mechanisms to delay large scale developments to allow for testing and hopefully, excavation. Even in the absence of such a commission, all Planning and Zoning Commissions, upon receiving an application, are authorized to require an investigation of a property to ascertain its historic value. In practice however, few do. David enthusiastically describes a best case scenario that occurred in Redding. “An archaeological survey of a large tract slated for development revealed that the majority of the land had historical significance. The best that you can usually hope for is permission to excavate, to gain as much information as you can. In this case however, the developer appreciated the discovery and reconceptualized his plan to avoid disturbing the archaeologically significant area.”

As the Colonial army fought for our country’s independence in the 1770’s, the “Tory Burr House” had already been standing for half a century. Developer interest in the circa 1710 saltbox on the corner of Freeborn and Norton Roads has occasioned exploration of the town’s adoption of another regulatory tool, a “Demolition Delay Ordinance.” Monroe, Wilton and Redding have utilized Connecticut Public Act 83-187 and 29-406 (a, b) to impose a ninety day waiting period prior to the demolition of any building. Easton Town Planner, John Hayes, described Redding’s successful use of the ordinance when the Redding Country Club purchased property to extend a fairway, planning to sacrifice a historic home on the site. The Demolition Delay Ordinance enabled the Redding Preservation Society to “rush into the breach – persuading the country club to wait while a buyer for the house was found.” The house was saved, dismantled and moved to a separate site.

The Easton Planning and Zoning Commission met with representatives of the Historical Society of Easton on April 10th to discuss the potential of such an ordinance. John feels the town would be best served by adopting a Demolition Delay Ordinance as soon as possible at town meeting while initiating pursuit of an even stronger level of protection – a “Historic Properties Ordinance,” as outlined in the proposed Town Plan of Conservation and Development. This would involve the creation of an independent commission to conduct a well-documented survey to compile a list of structures with historic significance. Once the permission of the owners is attained, the ordinance would ensure the preservation of the exterior of historic buildings. As John observed, “The Tory Burr house is a classic example of the type of house that should be saved.”

At the 2004 CFE annual meeting, state archaeologist Dr. Nicholas Bellantoni explained that the archaeology of America’s Colonial period is unique in that it lies largely above ground, preserved in period antique homes. We are fortunate that Easton remains rich in these standing monuments to our New England heritage. As the current stewards of the town, we should incorporate in our town plan the tools available to preserve pieces integral to the town’s history. CFE believes that the town should move forward in forming a Historical and Archaeological Resources Commission, Demolition Delay Ordinance and Historic Properties Ordinances.

Centennial Forest

The only evidence that a spectacular and mostly undiscovered world lies just beyond our backyard is a small white sign that reads “Centennial Watershed State Forest.” These signs – which have been affixed to trees along Route 58 and other roads in recent months – have replaced the familiar yellow ones that the Bridgeport Hydraulic Company placed around the borders of its extensive properties after World War II. Besides color, here’s the other big difference: The yellow signs forbid public access, but the white ones invite it.

In one of the most dramatic developments in Easton’s recent history, Gov. Jodi Rell dedicated the first new state forest in Connecticut in three decades in 2004. The good news for Easton residents is that much of it lies here within our borders. According to a press release issued at the time, “The state acquired conservation and public access easements to properties directly adjacent to reservoirs and streams, and the title to properties in close proximity to the reservoirs and throughout the watersheds [and] the 15,000 acres that make up the Centennial Watershed State Forest are heavily forested with miles of pristine streams, upland ridges, and reservoir shorefront.” That’s the good news. Now, a cautionary note: while access to watershed is open to the public for the first time in a century, not all of it is, and the state and the Department of Environmental Protection continue to determine (and debate) exactly what sort of access should be granted and where.

Here's one general rule of thumb: much of this land is crisscrossed by so-called "unimproved roads" which were laid down when Easton was still a place where Indian and settlers lived uneasily side by side. Those roads, for the most part, are now open for hiking. For more information, contact Dennis Schain at the DEP (860-524-7313 or dennis.schain@po.state.ct.us.) and join CFE on June 3 for a hike (see insert for details) to discover a part of Easton that most people haven't seen in over a century.

Farmland Development Alternatives

As Easton has repeatedly found itself in the position of reacting to development plans for the town's farms, it would be advisable to revisit and initiate some of the recommendations of the Easton Farmland Preservation Committee. Created in 2000 by the board of Selectmen, the EFPC sought to take a proactive stance by studying various means of preserving Easton's farmland in the face of strong development pressure. By encouraging farmers to explore alternate means for realizing the financial potential for their property, and by urging the town to adopt more "farmer friendly" policies, the EFPC hoped to promote a more cooperative relationship between farmers and the town relative to land development. In case they've been forgotten, some of the EFPC proposals include:

- Creating a more "farmer-friendly environment" allowing farmers to use other means to ensure a steady year round income, via granting special permits for such activities as: rental of office or apartment space on the farm, agritourism (a la Silverman's Farm), alternate use of land (greenhouses, composting), temporary leasing of land
- Allocating a percentage of the annual town budget for the purchase of farmland development rights
- Encouraging the utilization of our farms and farmlands in lieu of inviting outside enterprises into town by helping to create: 1) a year-round Farmers' Market held in a barn/outbuilding of one of Easton's farms, 2) a gardening school or horticultural camp on one of our farms, 3) a country bed and breakfast on a farm
- Surveying farmers as to their current situation, future plans for their lands, and their openness to such preservation incentives as listed above.

Choose Clean Energy

In keeping with our positive vision for the future of this community, Citizens for Easton encourages everyone in Easton to join the effort to create a clean energy future. While it may not be possible for each of us to install our own solar panel or windmill, we can promote energy from renewable sources by enrolling in the CT CleanEnergyOptions program. Two clean energy companies are now certified to supply clean energy to Connecticut. When you choose one of the options, you experience no change in your service/reliability, and you continue to get your bill from UI. Depending on your specific choice, you pay a small additional cost (about \$3-6 per month for every 500 Kwh) for energy that comes from wind, small-scale hydro-electric, or other clean sources.

Why should we bother? Because eventually, our collective demand will help create a market for clean energy, with greater supply and lower prices. Imagine the impact on the energy market as thousands of Connecticut households and businesses choose clean energy. Instead of meeting increased demand for electricity with traditional fossil fuel resources, energy providers will invest in clean energy technologies. The benefits of clean energy include decreased dependence on foreign oil and a reduction in air pollution, which will foster better health for us and, most importantly, for future generations. A small investment now will truly allow us all to reap great rewards later. Enrolling in CT CleanEnergyOptions is easy — just go to www.ctcleanenergyoptions.com to learn more about your options and to make this important choice for our future.