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Forks planners endorse 'cluster' zoning proposal

Developers oppose ordinance. Changes could affect all zoning districts across the township.

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FORKS TWP. | A new zoning ordinance that encourages cluster development in the farmland preservation district met with a favorable recommendation from the planning commission Tuesday night.

Speaking on behalf of developers of Kings Mill, attorney Dennis Benner expressed his opposition to boosting lot sizes in the farmland preservation district.

In December, the developers submitted a plan for 185 single-family homes on 2-acre lots in the district, Benner said.

Changes in the laws call for boosting minimum lot sizes in the farmland preservation district from 2 to 3 acres per single-family home, according to a summary of the law.

That can be reduced to one acre if the developer picks "cluster" development. That style of development preserves 50 percent of a developed tract as open space.

Hiking up the lot size for regular development creates an incentive for developers to pick the cluster style, said Charlie Schmehl with the Urban Research and Development Corporation in Bethlehem.

Planning commission member Erik Chuss said the changes in the farmland preservation district bring the township in line with other municipalities with bigger lot sizes.

But Benner said the plan will drive down property values and hurt farmers who were hoping to retire on profits from their land.

Changes to the zoning ordinance reveal an "anti-development" mentality and represent the work of "zealots" who failed to consider appropriate alternatives, Benner said after the meeting.

Benner represents Kings Mill Development Co. LLC, a partnership between Nic Zawarski & Sons and Signature Homes. Benner said his clients have an agreement of sale on 500 acres in the farmland preservation district.

In August, he approached the planning commission with dueling sketches of housing developments for 380 acres in the farmland preservation district. A plan for 837 homes met with an unfavorable recommendation; an alternate plan for 162 homes has not moved forward in the planning process.

Another developer expressed concerns about potential changes to the employment center district. New zoning regulations would reduce by 32 homes a proposal for 135 manufactured homes along Kesslerville Road, dubbed Jacobs Farm II, said Matthew Jinks, vice president of the development company.

Changes call for 100-foot setbacks between manufactured homes and industrial lots. Jacobs' Farm II borders industrial development on the western and northern sides of the property.

Planning commission member James Wideman said submitted plans are not subject to pending zoning

laws. He was unsure if the laws apply to submitted sketch plans.

Zoning districts across the township would change under the ordinance. The zoning ordinance comes before supervisors for a public hearing at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 7, at the new municipal building, 1606 Sullivan Trail.

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