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Forks Township gets flak for zoning plan

Officials want to buck trend, up lot sizes to save open space.

By Joe Nixon
Of The Morning Call

The Forks Township Planning Commission backed a revamped zoning ordinance Tuesday, but a change for the farmland preservation district drew fire from a development partnership already looking to build in the farm area under current zoning standards.

In an effort to preserve open space and farmland, and promote clustering of single-family homes, the new ordinance dictates larger lot sizes for most conventional residential development. But in return for clustering and preserving open space, minimum lot sizes are often reduced.

Dennis Benner, a Bethlehem attorney representing the King's Mill development partnership of Nic Zawarski & Son and Signature Homes, said the proposed change to increase the minimum lot size for conventional development in the farmland district by one acre, to three acres — but to allow clustering on 1-acre lots if half the tract is preserved — represented an "anti-development mentality," deprived the land of its value, and contributed to a lack of affordable housing.

Benner said the developers late last year filed plans for 185 single-family homes on about 500 acres in the farmland district, a project he said would be grandfathered under the current 2-acre minimum lot size. Under the current King's Mill proposal, there is no open space, Benner said. The developers unsuccessfully sought a zoning change last year to allow much greater housing density.

Benner said if the clustering option meant giving half of a tract up for open space, the minimum lot sizes should be reduced. "You can plan a lot of open space and still have a small lot size," he said after the public meeting on the ordinance. "That's what they fail to realize." The farmland district is not served by public water and sewer, and the township has no plans to recommend it there.

"We're trying to do the best we can for the township here in this ordinance," Planning Commission Chairman Vito Tamborrino Jr. said during the meeting, adding the main goal was open space. "We don't have to lay down and die in terms of people coming in here and developing."

Outside the meeting, Tamborrino said the clustering option would allow the same number of units on a tract in the farmland district as can be built under current standards. In comments during the meeting, Commission Vice Chairman Erik Chuss said many communities have adopted much stricter standards in areas like Forks' farmland district. "We felt this was at least a fair compromise," he said.

A revised zoning ordinance has been the subject of workshop meetings for about the past year, and officials said the review was necessary so standards in individual zoning districts more accurately reflected the purposes of the districts. As an example, new housing will no longer be permitted in the Town Center zoning district, an area set aside as a business center.

Township supervisors will hold their own public meeting on the zoning ordinance Feb. 7 and have scheduled a vote for Feb. 16.

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