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From The Morning Call

Forks planners vote against housing plan

Suggestion to keep 2-acre minimum for farmland district draws applause.

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The Forks Township Planning Commission late Thursday recommended township supervisors reject consideration of a development partnership's proposal to significantly increase housing density in the township's farmland preservation district.

The unanimous vote was greeted by applause from a crowd of about 300 people, primarily township residents, who came out to object to the proposal.

Kings Mill Development Co., LLC, a partnership of developers Nic Zawarski & Son and Signature Homes, has approached Forks with two ideas for development on two tracts — totalling nearly 400 acres — in the farmland preservation zoning district.

No formal plans for either approach have been submitted, but the plan for roughly 800 units on the parcels would have called for a zoning overlay, a concept the planners soundly rejected. An overlay would allow development that met certain criteria, but would not eliminate the underlying farmland zoning.

An alternate plan calls for 162 homes on the same land and complies with the 2-acre minimum lot size in the zoning district.

The developers' attorney, Dennis Benner of Bethlehem, has said about \$10 million in donated capital improvements, possibly including a new township public works garage and park and recreation areas, are part of the proposal to allow the denser housing. The donated capital improvements are not part of the 162-home proposal.

Under the higher-density proposal, a 55-and-older development is being eyed for a 166-acre tract at Richmond and Newlins roads, while upscale single-family housing is proposed for roughly 114 acres near Padula, Uhler and Richmond Roads.

"The problem is not sprawl, it's density," said Planner Erik Chuss, who got a standing ovation from the crowd after his remarks. "We shouldn't even be considering one unit over the allowed 162 units."

Planning Commission members were skeptical of figures supplied by developers that showed a \$1.9 million annual surplus to the school district from the high-density development, which includes a plan for a 460-unit active adult community. The higher density plan also called for donating 41 acres of open space to Forks.

Benner said figures the developers gathered don't show "the horrendous, catastrophic events" from the development that were being suggested.

Planner Dean Turner said a main issue was extending public water and sewer into the farmland district, something he said would allow higher density housing to spread. "I'm not in favor of that."

Officials from neighboring communities also spoke. Lower Mount Bethel Supervisor Vice Chairman Luis Santiago Jr. said opening up the northeastern section of Forks would jeopardize the hard work of township farmers who have land in farmland preservation programs.

Benner said he anticipated the reaction of the residents and the vote from the planners.

"I knew before I walked in here that would be their reaction," he said. "Everything has a process and we're going to follow a process." He said the developers will take their case to the supervisors.

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