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Parker Homes not giving up despite Planning Board rejection of nursing-facility plan in Monroe

By Susan Loyer
| Staff Writer

Despite the township Planning Board's dismissal of an application to build a long-term nursing care facility in the township, Parker Homes officials said they will continue to move forward.

The Planning Board voted unanimously to dismiss without prejudice a site-plan application by the Francis E. Parker Memorial Home to build the facility on Schoolhouse Road. The board's decision left the door open for Parker to submit a new application at a later date.

"On behalf of the many senior citizens who live in Monroe Township, we are stunned and saddened by the Planning Board's rejection of an application for a nonprofit nursing home," Roberto Muniz, president and CEO of Parker Homes, said in a statement. "No doubt, we will evaluate all options available, including the appeal of this decision in the courts. We are more dedicated than ever to ensure that the people of Monroe receive quality, affordable, skilled nursing care."

The Francis E. Parker Memorial Home Inc., which operates nursing-care and assisted-living facilities in Piscataway, Highland Park and New Brunswick, applied to the board to build Parker at Monroe, a facility that would consist of 96 nursing-care beds and 32 assisted-living beds.

During the Jan. 26 Planning Board meeting at Monroe Township Middle School, Board Chairman David Rothman read a letter sent by Parker's attorney, Robert Smith, stating that Parker officials were withdrawing without prejudice the portions of the application seeking approval of the 32 assisted-living beds at the proposed facility.

The 32 beds were removed after Parker was notified that Monroe's assistant township attorney, Marguerite Schaffer, found that the units were not conditionally permitted, although Parker previously had been told by planning and zoning officials that the proposed use was conditionally permitted, Smith said.

Parker, which had a certificate of need for only 96 nursing-care beds, said the 32 beds would be removed until possibly a later date.

Planner Mark Remsa said that "a 25 percent reduction is a substantial change, and that's not what's in the application today."

Remsa said a formal amendment to the application was not filed and the public notice received for the application was defective in that the notice reflected 96 nursing beds and 32 assisted-living beds.

"My opinion would be that you can't go forward with this because of the jurisdictional issue of the defective public notice," Remsa said, adding that there is a substantial change in the application before the board.

Board Attorney Jerome Convery agreed.

“My view as the board attorney is that it is a significant change,” he said. “The notice that was provided does still refer to the original application. Therefore, I agree with the board planner that the notice is actually erroneous and misleading. Not intentionally, but because it went out previously, it contains information that is different than what is being proposed tonight.”

Convery asked the applicant to withdraw the application without prejudice. Smith declined and asked to put his objections on the record. He said his client invested millions of dollars in the project and changing from 128 to 96 beds is not a big deal.

“The application before the board is exactly the same as the application that started,” he said, adding that the buildings footprint, lighting, landscaping and parking would remain the same. “In front of land-use boards all over this state — planning and zoning — applicants withdraw variances every night there is an application. We do not believe this is a significantly different application. In all of Middlesex County, towns would be thrilled to have Francis Parker in their town.”

Smith also said there are at least 300 families in Monroe who are interested in the facility.

Although Rothman sympathized with the applicant, he said he agreed with the board’s professionals.

“Mr. Smith, I feel for you and your applicant,” he said. “However, with that said, this board wants to do it right this time to make sure it’s done right and not have any confusion. What advise you were told in the past and whether it was correct or incorrect is not what we have before us now. This is what the board has to review. We have jurisdictional issues here that I think must take precedence.”

Rothman also said this is something the board would want to review in the future.

Although there was no public comment period at the meeting, some residents have expressed concern about the project and the additional traffic that could be brought into the neighborhood. Some said the project also would result in depreciation of property values in the neighborhood.

Parker officials said the facility is consistent with the residential nature of the neighborhood and that traffic engineering studies have found that Parker at Monroe would have a nominal impact on local traffic. Parker also said that the facility would not adversely impact property values in the neighborhood.
