

City of Northfield Planning Board
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Minutes: July 11, 2019

Notice of this meeting had been given in accordance with Chapter 231 Public Law 1975, otherwise known as the Open Public Meetings Act. Notice of this meeting had been given to The Press, posted on the bulletin board in City Hall, filed with the City Clerk, and posted on the City website, stating the date, time and place of the meeting and the agenda to the extent known.

This REGULAR meeting of the Northfield Planning Board held on Thursday, July 11, 2019 in Council Chambers, City Hall, Northfield, was opened by Chairman Richard Levitt at 7:00 p.m. with the reading of the Sunshine Law and the following members present or absent as noted:

Mayor Erland Chau-absent
Jim Leeds
Dr. Richard Levitt
Joe Massari
Chief Paul Newman-absent
Henry Notaro-absent
Councilman Frank Perri-absent
Daniel Reardon
Ron Roegiers
Derek Rowe
Clem Scharff-absent
Jim Shippen-absent
Steve Vain

Matthew Doran, PE, PP-Planning Board Engineer

Mark H. Stein, Esq.-Planning Board Solicitor

There was one application on the agenda for Career Opportunity Development, Inc. for the property at 1717 Zion Road, Block 95 Lot 2 in the O-PB zone for a "D" use variance. The attorney for the applicant was Charles Gemmel, Esq. of the firm Gemmel, Todd, & Merenich of Linwood. The Engineer, Robert A. Bruce, P.E. was also present. Other witnesses present were Phil Sartorio, Planner, Lou Strugala, the seller of the property and also the general contractor, and Linda Carney President and CEO of CODI.

Mr. Gemmel addressed the Board and stated CODI provides housing for disabled adults and they have a purchase contract with Mr. Strugala to buy the property at 1717 Zion Road. The home is in disrepair and is beyond its years and they would like to demolish it and put a manufactured residential home on the site for a small group of residents. The current use is residential and has been for a long period of time. Since they intend to demo the current house, they will require a non-conforming use variance since the zone is now commercial. They believe they can meet the positive and negative criteria. They also need

an additional variance for building size. The Ordinance requires a size of 1500 sf for this zone and they are requesting a size of 1177 sf.

The witnesses were sworn in together by Dr. Levitt.

Ms. Linda Carney testified first. She has been in her position for 33 years. She said CODI has been in existence for fifty years and is based in Egg Harbor City. They provide safe housing for disabled adults and they also have businesses that are community related employment opportunities for those they provide housing for. They also provide income and training for them so that they may become independent members of the community. They intend to have three people living in this particular home. They are currently in an older rental home. Funding will be available from the state for this home and it will be more energy efficient and the location will be an improvement. These are individuals with disabilities and mental illness and they are older people. This is not a drug rehabilitation facility. The individuals have mobility issues but are not wheelchair bound. Mr. Stein said that state requires municipalities to permit these types of homes and if they were putting the home a block away, a variance wouldn't be necessary. Dr. Levitt asked if the home would qualify as affordable housing. Mr. Gemmel stated he will get to that.

Ms. Carney said this location will work for two reasons. The group home inhabitants are now located in Atlantic City and it will be more advantageous for them to move to Northfield. It became apparent that they needed more physical support. This will be a one story home, and they will be able to provide a bedroom for each of them. The site is also near a bus route and they will have 24 hour staff, seven days per week. This will be conducive to the staff because it is where they live and it will be more accessible for them.

Mr. Lou Strugala is the property owner of 1717 Zion Road. It used to be Ruth Ernst's home and many remember her as being a memorable teacher at Mainland Regional. He has owned the house for three years and is under contract with CODI to purchase it. Mr. Strugala will be the contractor who will demolish the current home. Mr. Gemmel asked him to describe his building background. He has been the Director of United Methodist Church in New Jersey for the past seven years and has rehabbed 350 homes statewide. The home at 1717 Zion Road is in bad condition. When he purchased the home he had hoped to rehab it. There are too many problems with it; the heating, electric, plumbing and foundation are bad and it is not a rehab-able house. He is proposing a new manufactured home which is now in Selinsgrove, PA and will be moved to the site on Zion Road. Mr. Strugala said the home is one story with three bedrooms and three storage closets. There is a kitchen and community living space, and the doorways are 36 inches and handicapped accessible. He said he is proposing a non-conforming use of a new home instead of the old home that exists now and that is more desirable. It will be more attractive than the existing home and will benefit zoning. He added that the house was built in 1850, but is not listed as historical in the city's records.

Mr. Phil Sartorio testified next. He is a licensed Planner in NJ for 32 years and he gave his credentials and was accepted by the Board. He described the use variance and addressed criteria. He said they are proposing to remove the existing non-conforming structure by demolition. The positive criteria are that they will be advancing special reasons according to the Land Use Law. The use is for a group home which is inherently beneficial to the public general welfare. Group homes are listed in the definition of special reasons criteria and the property is well suited for this use. It is an existing residential property. Three sides of the site are parking lots and it is not on a major road. There is an impact on COAH housing numbers. The group home will count as three units of credit for the city's COAH numbers, and as a rental, it could go up to six units for the report due next July or for final compliance in 2025. As to

negative criteria, there is no adverse impact on surrounding properties, the parking lots, or any commercial properties. It is close to a residential zone, and other than the bulk variance for size, which is 1177 sf and 1500 sf is required for the O-PB zone; the home will meet uniform construction code. Dr. Levitt commented that the house might possibly be listed as historic, but there is nothing in the Ordinance to prohibit destruction.

Mr. Robert Bruce, the Engineer for CODI spoke next. He displayed the plan included with the application. The current home is a white two story dwelling. The new structure will conform to include two parking spaces on site and curbs and sidewalks will need to be addressed. There is a rolled asphalt curb that is existing and he said the Board will require a sidewalk. Dr. Levitt said people who are parking for the Funeral Home will cut across this property and he agreed they will need a sidewalk. Mr. Bruce addressed street trees and said there is vegetation on the property, a maple tree and two others, and they plan to leave the three trees shown on the plan. Mr. Strugala said there are actually four trees in front that are maintainable and salvageable. They may have to remove a few on the side especially a dead apple tree. The rest of the trees on the site are healthy.

The Board questioned the witnesses. Mr. Roegiers asked if there would be trash storage on site. Dr. Levitt said trash would be picked up as residential by Atlantic County. Mr. Stein noted that the state designates these types of homes as residential. Dr. Levitt commented that if the home were 100 ft. away, no variance would be necessary. Mr. Massari asked if any buses would pull up to the property. Ms. Carney said that there may be small vans since the residents do not have vehicles. There will be one employee at a time at the home and there will be no commercial vehicles. Mr. Leeds asked if the basement will be finished. Mr. Sartorio said it will be a crawl space.

Dr. Levitt opened the public session. He swore in Arlene Groch of 1413 Shore Road. She said Dr. George Groch and she own the medical complex across the street and she is in favor of the variance. She thinks it will be an improvement and that the existing home is an eyesore. She didn't think a commercial property should be at the site. She stated that 22 years ago, she sold a property that is now a group home and that makes her happy. Dr. Levitt closed the public session since there was no one else who wished to speak.

Mr. Leeds made the motion for the use variance and the "C" variance for building size that comes under commercial zoning criteria to grant the variance for the building's first floor footprint. Mr. Rowe seconded the motion.

Mayor Chau-absent

Mr. Leeds-yes

Mr. Massari-yes

Chief Newman-absent

Mr. Notaro-absent

Councilman Perri-absent

Mr. Reardon-yes

Mr. Roegiers-yes

Mr. Rowe-yes

Mr. Scharff-absent

Mr. Shippen-absent

Mr. Vain-yes

Chairman Levitt-yes

The motion carries.

Dr. Levitt commented that he felt this to be a wonderful use for the property. Mr. Vain said he has concerns about historical buildings and there not being an Ordinance or Historical Commission. He noted that the old homes are recognized but there is nothing specific. Dr. Levitt said it can be looked into when the Master Plan is revisited but the problem is that some of the buildings are so old that the supporting wood is not restorable and beyond fixing.

Dr. Levitt closed the meeting at 7:32 p.m. with a motion from Mr. Roegiers and a second from Mr. Reardon.

Respectfully submitted,

Robin Atlas, Secretary to the Board