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FRAMINGHAM

Housing for teens riles neighbors Plan's foes cite traffic concerns

By Lisa Kocian, Globe Staff | February 17, 2005

A proposal to build a facility for 72 youths with emotional and behavioral problems is stirring up trouble in a Framingham neighborhood.

Lockland Avenue residents are vowing to appeal a permit granted for the \$15 million project.

"We're concerned about the fact they're changing the zoning. We're concerned about the nature of the use," resident Tom O'Neil said. "We don't know for sure how serious these kids are."

The young residents have been referred to as "troubled youths," he said, and neighbors question whether the town should have been more careful in granting a building permit to the Wayside Youth and Family Support Network, a Framingham-based nonprofit agency that provides residential and counseling services to young people.

The 14.5-acre site for the project between Lockland Avenue and Route 9 is already owned by Wayside, which has promised to clean up an old landfill there.

The key argument posed by both the town and Wayside is that the proposal to house and school youths between 12 and 17 is protected under the Dover Amendment, a state law exempting schools from all but a few local zoning requirements.

Town Manager George P. King Jr. said he believes the project is exempt, as does Building Commissioner Joseph Mikielian, who issued the permit.

O'Neil questioned that. And he said he has been stonewalled in trying to get information about talks and correspondence between Wayside and the town.

Eric Masi, the president of Wayside, emphasized that none of the youths at the facility would have criminal records.

The teenagers go to Wayside generally for one of two reasons. In some cases, a court or the state has determined they need to be removed from their homes temporarily because of a family problem, such as a parent who is addicted to drugs, he said.

In other cases, Wayside will be taking youths who have previously been in psychiatric hospitals but could be treated in a community-based program.

Some of the youths will attend the on-site school and some will continue at whatever school they are attending. Masi stressed that the program wouldn't add any children to the Framingham schools.

A total of 90 to 100 employees will work at the 24-hour facility in shifts, Masi said, with more on duty during the day, and fewer overnight and on weekends.

The 60,000-square-foot building and parking will take up about 2 acres of the 14.5-acre parcel, he said.

Wayside attorney Kenneth N. Margolin said most of the complaints he's heard from residents have to do with traffic, but that's not a valid reason to deny a permit under the Dover Amendment. Moreover, Wayside voluntarily commissioned two traffic studies that showed no impact on traffic, he said.

Grove Street resident Karl Thober has been following the debate, although he doesn't live in the immediate neighborhood. He doesn't agree that there won't be a problem with the increased traffic, and he said that would reduce the quality of life for all residents.

"The traffic there is terrible now," he said. "They [have] got a Dunkin' Donuts there and the traffic backs up onto the shoulder, and there's all the people merging from Route 30.

"I realize their motives are certainly good to try to help the kids, but I'm not at all sure that that's the place it should be done."

Thober said he's also concerned about the shifting of the tax burden to residents who can ill afford it because of social-service agencies that buy land that is then no longer taxable.

Wayside has promised \$300,000 for an upgrade of the town sewer system, according to a November letter from Margolin to the building commissioner, and the group has offered to talk about a voluntary annual payment in lieu of taxes.

Masi said the project was scaled back in response to neighbors' concerns about three years ago when meetings and talks about the project started.

"We fully intend to be a very good neighbor . . . respecting the wishes of the neighbors who object," he said, "while at the same time protecting the rights of our children to live and be treated in the community."