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LOCAL NEWS

Ex-State House watchdog is back in his environment

By Peter Reuell / News Staff Writer

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FRAMINGHAM -- He's not running for office, but former state senator and top environmental watchdog Bob Durand is back to banging on doors.

Durand last week began a door-to-door campaign to drum up support and gauge neighborhood concern over a local nonprofit agency's plans for a campus-style headquarters.

The former secretary for Environmental Affairs, Durand's recently launched company, Durand and Anastas Environmental Strategies, was hired this month by Wayside Youth and Family Support Network to organize the public portion of the cleanup of the proposed site.

In a meeting with MetroWest Daily News staff last week, Durand said he plans to go door-to-door to bring residents up to speed on what contamination is on the site, how the cleanup will work and, hopefully, how it will benefit the neighborhood.

"It's a win-win," Durand insisted. "It's an opportunity to clean the site and provide some needed counseling for troubled kids in the area."

The campus project, which could cost from \$10 million to \$12 million, would include three two-story, dormitory-like buildings, each housing about two dozen teens. School and administration buildings, a gymnasium and areas for a baseball diamond and soccer field are also included.

The agency now operates about 15 group homes in MetroWest, including eight in Framingham and Marlborough. The campus concept would allow Wayside to consolidate at least seven homes at a single location.

The proposed project has left neighbors wary, worrying about the effects of increased traffic and environmental impacts on the site.

That's where Durand comes in.

As part of a state-mandated Public Involvement Process, the agency must hold a public hearing on how they plan to clean the land, which is contaminated with a host of chemicals, including chromium, arsenic and lead.

Following his face-to-face talks with neighbors, Durand plans to hold a public meeting on the site, and use neighbors' comments to produce a report on how to clean the property.

"The environment here is obvious," he said. "We've got a brownfields site...it's contaminated with hazardous waste and other things, so it's a great smart growth project."

Neighborhood opponents of the project have been less enthusiastic.

Though he wasn't surprised to see Durand's environmental pedigree snatched up by a developer, Steve Whitkin, president of the Sucker Pond Neighborhood Association, this month said he'd take a "wait and see" approach.

"My take is that you've got district attorneys that become defense attorneys," he said. "So you got people who have been in charge of environmental protection who now work for developers. I'm not surprised by it."

"Whether or not this project goes in, to get this site cleaned up is definitely a bonus," he added. "I'm hoping that the public is involved. I'm hoping all the offices, and all the officers of Framingham are involved. This should be a town concern."

With the public process getting off the ground, Wayside President Eric Masi said the agency in the coming weeks will turn its attention toward the early stages of construction.

In the next few weeks, he said, the agency will file for a building permit, and hopes to begin construction by January 2004. Work should be completed in 14 to 16 months.