

Developer Proposes 168 Units in Middle

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MIDDLE TOWNSHIP -- A Missouri-based development company is proposing a 168-unit affordable-housing apartment complex in Rio Grande.

Top Sail Cos. will appear before the Middle Township Zoning Board on March 12 to seek variances for their proposed project called The Meadows of Rio Grande. Approval of use variances would be the first step in a multiple-step process that also requires approval from Middle Township Committee and from the state's Council On Affordable Housing, or COAH. Top Sail is proposing a complex of seven apartment buildings to low- and moderate-income renters. Plans include a community building on a 17-acre tract in an area near 4006 Route 9 South in Rio Grande.

Thomas Hillegass, a Cape May Court House attorney representing Top Sail, said the complex would help the township fulfill its requirements to provide affordable housing under the state's COAH guidelines. Township officials say they are obligated to provide more than 900 units of affordable housing under COAH in the next nine years.

"It's a great idea being proposed under the COAH guidelines and statutes to help meet Middle Township's obligation for 934 units of affordable housing," Hillegass said.

Top Sail is seeking variances from the Zoning Board, including ones for the height of the buildings, which is proposed at 44 feet, nine feet higher than zoning regulations allow. It is seeking another variance for the density the buildings would create in the area.

If the zoning board approves its plans, the development company would need the Township Committee to pass resolutions to declare the need to bring affordable housing to the township and to accept a payment in lieu of taxes, Hillegass said.

This means the township would grant a tax exemption to the property.

In April of 2008, Township Committee granted a similar tax exemption to the Diocesan Housing Services Corporation, the nonprofit housing corporation of the Diocese of Camden, which planned to build a 74-unit affordable-housing complex on Route 47 in Rio Grande for senior citizens. In that case, that payment in lieu of taxes was set at 15 percent of the gross rents, Township Solicitor James Pickering said.

The Zoning Board needs to make a decision before the township can address any payment in lieu of taxes, Pickering said.

In January, the Diocese project received \$11.2 million in federal funds that officials said it needed before planning could begin.

Top Sail's proposed affordable-housing complex is significantly larger - and it has some residents concerned.

At a Township Committee work session meeting Monday night, resident Eileen Fausey said the project was being rushed along without adequate time for the community to consider it.

Other residents were worried about the effects a 168-unit housing complex would have on crime and whether the tax-exempt status would burden township taxpayers.

On Monday night, the property managers who would run the complex appeared before Township Committee.

Donald Miller, vice president of Interstate Realty Management headquartered in Marlton, Burlington County, said his company manages 40 other complexes in New Jersey. Most have several staff members on site for administration and maintenance, he said.

And the complex would operate like other rental housing, he said - if people don't pay their rent, they're evicted.

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