

The Columbia Paper

Will Ancram balk at 'glam' campers?

January 14, 2022 by DIANE VALDEN

ANCRAM—While the Iron Star Retreat Center project is being tweaked, a group of concerned local citizens have hired a lawyer to protect their interests.

At the Planning Board's January 6 meeting with about 75 people tuned in on Zoom and a dozen or so gathered in-person at the Town Hall, Chairman John Ingram reopened the public hearing on the Iron Star Retreat Center application on advice of counsel. Taylor M. Palmer, a partner in the law firm of Cuddy & Feder, who represents the applicant, had asked that the matter be adjourned until February while the Iron Star team "reworks certain areas of the project to be responsive to public comment."

Mr. Palmer and Iron Star Founder Stacey Shurgin, president at Leeds Associates LLC, a NYC real estate management and development company, were present remotely.

The Planning Board's first order of business was to declare itself lead agency in connection with the controversial project proposed for four parcels totaling about 150 acres at 2540 State Route 82 on the southwest side of the road. The property was formerly owned by Luigi DiMaio.

The project will include the adaptive reuse of an existing residence for a five-guestroom inn, and the development of four separate lodging cottages (creek houses) for overnight accommodations, including three separate buildings for associated recreational support uses on the east side of the property.

On the west side of the property a "glamping" area with 22 individual camping structures is proposed. The inn will also have a restaurant for patrons utilizing produce from the onsite organic farming operation. Recreational amenities for the commercial retreat will include massage, horseback riding, swimming (an indoor pool), exercise and art. The camping use will be glamorous camping ("glamping") and will be provided in individual cabins and rustic buildings. Organic farming will utilize open space on the site that has been used historically for farming operations and will also include the construction of two farm-related buildings to support produce processing and equipment storage.

Planning Board Attorney John Lyons said he had communicated with Mr. Palmer about "what the board is looking for" which includes "a complete submission" of "full plan sets."

Mr. Lyons noted that the board needs "to digest what's in front of them"... "to discuss [the application] amongst themselves and their consultants" at a workshop session.

Mr. Palmer said the applicant is "eager to modify the plans" which will result in "a refreshing update."

Among those who commented publicly at the meeting were Lucy Hayden of Cottontail Road, who said she was having trouble accessing copies of the project map that were large enough to see.

Jan Hanvik of Poole Hill Road read through a long list of bad online reviews aimed at Ms. Shurgin's real estate management firm and other projects she is connected with.

Tina Akins who lives opposite the planned resort on Route 82 wanted to know why the term "glamping" was being used when guests would be staying in houses, not tents.

The board received a nine-page letter from the Albany law firm of Whiteman, Osterman and Hanna, LLC, making seven points about what is wrong with the Iron Star application.

Attorney Thomas A. Shepardson wrote in the letter dated January 6, that his firm has been retained by a group of local concerned citizens, which included but was not limited to, owners of property directly adjacent and/or opposite the proposed Iron Star development.

The intent of the letter was to express clients' concerns about the Iron Star development.

First on the list, was that a portion of the project (13.2 acres) is located in the Ancram Hamlet Residential (AH R2) Zoning District, where this type of development it is not permitted.

The lawyer said the Planning Board should stop review of this development, and the public hearing, until a decision is made by the Town Board about whether it will rezone the area to authorize this use.

Attorney Palmer, representing Iron Star, attended the Town Board's December 16 meeting to ask that the zoning be changed for that small portion of the property from AH R2 to Agricultural, like the rest of the property.

He told the Town Board that he has "no understanding of why the 'carve-out' is there." He said there are no lot boundaries there and it is not clear why it is laid out that way.

Councilman David Boice said, "There were a bunch of trailers there that's why the [residential zone] is there."

Iron Star has already removed three mobile homes from the property, a move which has been criticized because Ancram has a lack of affordable housing.

The Town Board acknowledged the receipt of Iron Star's petition for a zoning change and said discussion about it and a decision will be made at a later date.

Other issues addressed by Attorney Shepardson in the concerned citizens' letter included:

*Application deficiencies; many project details have not yet been submitted, making it impossible for the public and the Planning Board to review or analyze significant project aspects. Attorney Shepardson wrote the situation is a "violation of my clients' rights to be full[y] apprised of all development aspects of the project and to be able to provide comments on them."

*Relevant information about the application has not been forthcoming from the Town, despite FOIL requests

*Many project aspects on which information had been submitted relating to water, traffic, lighting and roadways were insufficient

*Potential violations of zoning and Town Law and failure to comply with the Comprehensive Plan.

*Potential for significant adverse environmental impacts

The Iron Star public hearing will continue at the next Planning Board meeting February 3 at 7 p.m.

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