



Tree removal plan falls short

The proposal would've cleared 16 acres around a fire tower in Bass River State Forest

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PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP — A proposal to clear about 16 acres of non-native trees that are impeding the views from a fire tower in Bass River State Forest is in jeopardy after it failed to garner enough support from members of the New Jersey Pinelands Commission. The 15-member commission, which oversees development and land use within the million-acre Pinelands, voted on the

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's application to remove the trees on Friday. But because the application did not receive enough "yes" votes needed for approval, the DEP may not proceed and the application must instead go before an administrative law judge to decide, creating the possibility of a prolonged legal fight between the two environmental agencies. Members of the commission staff said such a development was unprecedented in the more than 30-year history of the commission. The DEP had sought the commission's approval to clear more than 3,000 white pines and other nonnative trees from around the

86-foot-tall fire tower, which is used by the state Forest Fire Service to spot smoke from the start of forest fires and to report on conditions to fire-fighters on the ground. The trees were planted in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps and have now grown over 90 feet high, obstructing the views from the tower to the north, east and south. The DEP and Forest Fire Service have argued that removing the trees is critical to public safety and the forest's protection. They plan to plant mostly native tree seedlings at the cleared sites. Those trees are expected to grow to between 15 to 20 feet over the next 20 years.

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The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has sought approval to clear more than 3,000 white pines and other nonnative trees from around the 86-foot-tall fire tower in the Bass River State Forest. [CONTRIBUTED]

Revitalizing Rancocas Woods



ABOVE: "I would say when I first got involved here, it was more or less a ghost town," said Michael Semola, who runs Made and Found Market. "(The stores) were in somewhat of a state of disrepair since no one had been tending to it for such a long time."

RIGHT: "I used to come here in the '80s and '90s because they had the best antique and craft shows anywhere and you would come in and you can't find a parking spot," said Giselle O'Neill, manager at Creek Mercantile.

[PHOTOS BY NANCY ROKOS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

New shops, planned apartments spark hope for small Mount Laurel village

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MOUNT LAUREL — Giselle O'Neill remembers the glory days of Rancocas Woods about 20 to 30 years ago, when an open parking spot was nowhere in sight. "I used to come here in the '80s and '90s because they had the best antique and craft shows anywhere and you would come in and you can't find a parking spot," said the Lumberton resident, of the small village off Creek Road. Things changed over the years, including shoppers' preferences. Once a popular destination that drew visitors to its boutiques, restaurants and craft and antique shows, the Rancocas Woods Village of Shops over the years lost customers to newer and larger stores and the convenience of online shopping. The property across Creek Road, a former shopping center, also sat primarily vacant for years, save for a few tenants, which also didn't help bring traffic to the area. The owner of many of the properties — Valerie Houser and her husband Orin — put 11 buildings, known for their rustic, log-cabin appearance along the northern side of Creek Road, up for sale in 2013. Houser's father, William Spencer, started the William Spencer Furniture and Home Furnishings in Rancocas Woods in the late 1940s and bought many of the properties, which stayed within the family until then. But now O'Neill is a part of the area's revitalization, as

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The old Rancocas Woods shopping center in Mount Laurel has taken its first steps to turn into luxury apartments, part of a larger plan to revitalize the village.
[PHOTOS BY NANCY ROKOS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

RANCOCAS

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manager and creative director for Creek Mercantile, a co-op that features vendors with vintage, antique and hand-made goods.

“Every person that came in the beginning was just so excited that it was coming back because they loved it,” she said.

She’s not the only one — a few other small businesses have opened up within the last few months and those businesses could be getting a boost from some potential new residents. The township’s Zoning Board recently approved plans for 37 apartments to be built at that shopping center site.

Reopening the stores

“Everyone remembers the heyday of the Rancocas Woods Craft and Antique show and so many people want to see it come back,” said Michael Semola, who has been running the newer version of the Made and Found Market.

Two key pieces to the rebirth are his cousin, Matthew Semola, owner of numerous buildings in the shopping center, and his brother-in-law Stephen Rush. Rush, who spent over 30 years in consumer sales, was brought on board by Semola to help create and launch businesses in the buildings he purchased.

Semola purchased several properties in 2017 that had been on the market for a few years.

“It came up for sale and (Semola and his business partner) bought the big building (now) Creek Mercantile, and then they just kind of piecemeal bought building after building after building,” Rush recalled.

After buying some of the properties, Semola approached Rush on advice on how to repurpose the buildings.

“He said, ‘I have all these empty buildings, what do you think we should do with them?’” Rush said.

They started by bringing vendors into Creek Mercantile — something the store still could use more of, O’Neill said.

It started with the opening of Creek Cafe, a coffee and small treat eatery in the same building as the Rustic Door, which features furniture pieces, to give the setting an “eclectic taste,” Rush said. Next came the pretzel stand which was bolstered after the purchase of BOOST! slushies, made by the BOOST! Company that has roots in Riverside.

Semola owns the buildings occupied by the Rancocas Woods Craft Co-Op and Second Time Books store, but each is operated by other business owners, Rush said.



The Timberlin Tole, at Rancocas Woods Shopping Center.

“Of course we’re business people, we want to make money with everything we do — but we also saw the long-term vision of not only bringing this place back to its glory days, but making it a lot better than it was,” Rush said.

That includes hosting open mic nights and other events at Creek Cafe every other Thursday to get people to come to the area.

It also hosts the Made and Found Market, traditionally held on the fourth Saturday, to attract shoppers.

The market, which has its roots in the antique and craft shows of old, features a mix of local and handmade items, antique and vintage products, food items and live music.

“They had hundreds of vendors, thousands of people coming every month and so it was in (Matthew Semola’s) best interest as a landlord to revitalize the shows, because that brought foot traffic into the businesses once a month,” Michael Semola said.

He has continued to run it monthly from March to December since bringing it back in early 2017. July’s market helped boost businesses to new levels, Rush said.

“We had our best day ever here (at Creek Cafe) on Saturday (July 28) ... the pretzel shop — we had our best day ever. We’re starting to see things come around,” he said.

Potential new customers

At the same time, Rush hopes potential shoppers across the street will bring more foot traffic over the next few years.



Creek Mercantile is one of the stores helping revitalize the Rancocas Woods Shopping Center.

“I look at it as a positive, as a business person great — we’re going to have 60 to 70 residents right across the street from us,” he said.

That’s still a bit of a ways off as the developer — Mount Laurel Manor Apartments — only recently received preliminary and final site plan approvals from the zoning board, which allowed 37 units located in what was a “neighborhood commercial zone.”

The plan calls for eight one-bedroom, 23 two-bedroom, two two-bedroom units with lofts and four three-bedroom units, according to Bill Giegerich, township director of economic and community development. The developer is responsible for creating six affordable units, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be in that building, Giegerich said, adding that the developer could purchase another property in town to meet requirements.

“Speaking with the residents and even council here in the township, they mention how back in the day that was such a thriving area and they would like to see that back once again being prosperous the way it was,” Giegerich said.

He said he hopes the apartments can be apart of that.

Resident Jeana LaScala, who works in the pretzel shop, said she was opposed to the plans at first, but her position shifted after listening to the developer talk about making use of the vacant property.

“They’re trying to fit it in and make it work with what’s already here,” she said. “Even though it’s apartments going in — I’m not totally for the apartments — but I’m not really for an empty shopping center either. We’ve been looking at it for like 10 years — we’re done with this.”

To get residents on board, Giegerich has partnered with Cater 2 U on Marne Highway

to host a community meeting at 7 p.m. Aug. 23.

“It’s going to be basically to discuss plans going forward on the best ways to redevelop and help grow the Rancocas Woods area,” he said.

Until then, Rush and Semola are going to continue to work to attract people to the area themselves.

“I would say when I first got involved here, it was more or less a ghost town,” Michael Semola said. “(The stores) were in somewhat of a state of disrepair since no one had been tending to it for such a long time.”

Rush said he hopes having events, such as the market, an upcoming antique show and night programming like open mic nights will attract more people. He said they’ve already seen it with the open mic nights.

“We started it about two months ago and we had six people,” he said. “(On July 26) we had 50. Nobody wanted to leave. But it was great.”

Rush said the focus is to continue to grow the stores open now, but that doesn’t mean they’re not keeping their eyes open for future opportunities.

“There’s three vacant buildings down the end near the bookstore that have been sitting there empty for years and our plan really is to grow these businesses, cultivate some revenue out of it and then purchase those buildings and then do something else down there,” he said.

For O’Neill of Creek Mercantile, something special is taking place.

“It’s exciting because there’s nothing like this right in this area. ... Even people from Philly love it,” she said.