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Woodstock Easement

WUHS Should Help Grange Hill

If Woodstock Union High School directors feel torn about a solicitation for help from developers of an affordable housing project that some West Woodstock neighbors oppose, they might overcome whatever reluctance they have by considering this fact: A refusal probably wouldn't stop the Grange Hill project, it would just make it more expensive.

Even better, they could recognize that the project is fully deserving of their support.

The project is an \$8.5 million 36-unit housing development that would offer a mix of condominiums and rentals, with the vast majority reserved for people with modest incomes. The site of the project, undertaken by the Woodstock Community Trust, Housing Vermont, Twin Pines Housing Trust and the Interfaith Housing Coalition, is off Route 4, across from the Woodstock Union High School.

One thing that isn't in dispute is the desperate need for affordable housing in the Upper Valley in general and Woodstock in particular. While the recession may have lowered the value of real estate, there is no evidence that it has depressed it sufficiently to bring housing prices and rental rates within the reach of the working poor.

What has become a source of contention, at least for those who would live next door to Grange Hill, is the suitability of the project for a neighborhood that is now mostly single-family homes. The neighbors argued that a dense multi-family housing project wouldn't fit into the area and that it would make an already bad traffic situation intolerable. When the Woodstock Development Review Board approved the project, five neighbors challenged that ruling in Vermont Environmental Court.

Although the West Woodstock residents are not ready to concede the point, those complaints have been thoroughly examined: The court ruled in October that the project satisfied town regulations in terms of its compatibility with the neighborhood and its impact on traffic. The court did find, however, that the proposal needed to make several revisions, including its plan for handling storm-water runoff. To that end, the developers asked the school district for an easement to run a couple of pipes across high school property to drain water into a nearby brook.

Not surprisingly, that became the opponents' new cause. Discharging the water into the brook will worsen spring flooding, they warn. Never mind that the plan has received the blessing of a school district engineer, not to mention state regulators.

The district submitted the question to residents of its six towns, and a narrow majority voted on March 3 in favor of granting the easement. That leaves the school board in something of a pickle. Woodstock, the largest town in the district, opposed the easement, albeit by a mere 11 votes, and at least some of the high school's neighbors remain steadfastly opposed. Politically, it's impossible to ignore those circumstances.

But unless board members determine that letting a couple of drainage pipes cross high school property is not in the best interests of the district, they should accede to the majority of voters and grant the easement. It's a good and needed project that has passed muster on both the local and state level. Expert opinion indicates that concern about flooding is a red herring, and project officials' opinion is that the objection is no deal-killer: A district rejection would just force developers to spend more money on coming up with a new storm-water plan, which they have pledged to do.

Yes, a handful of West Woodstock residents remain opposed to the project, but the only thing that rejecting the easement will accomplish is to push up the cost of developing Grange Hill. What's the sense of that ?

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