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Government

Belmar Council Hears Debate on Amendment to Seaport Village Redevelopment Plan



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BELMAR, NJ - A group of residents voiced their concerns about potential changes to the Seaport Village Redevelopment Plan during the Mayor & Town Council Meeting on March 1 at the Belmar Municipal Court. The event included the second reading and public hearing for an ordinance that would amend the plan by focusing on Block 87, Lots 1, 2, and 3—an area referred to in the amendment as the Seaport Village Southwest Redevelopment Area.

The documentation under discussion includes amended boundaries for the redevelopment area, as well as lot and bulk requirements for any developments in the zone. Of particular interest to the public and the council was the

maximum building height of 60 feet, up from the previous proposal of 52 feet. Also included in the handout was a map that highlights the Marina-Maclearie Park Rehabilitation Area, Seaport Village Redevelopment Area, and Seaport Southwest sub-area.

Before opening the meeting to public comments, Borough Clerk April Claudio read into the record emails from four people who could not attend the meeting and are against the ordinance, primarily because of what they consider strains on the town's "inadequate" and "aging" infrastructure. One resident believes the community "does not need high-density development, particularly on the waterfront and in a flood zone." She noted that the community has learned a lot about sustainability and flood risk in the two decades since the creation of the original redevelopment plan. Two other residents are worried about changing Belmar's identity and culture, with one writing, "Belmar is a beautiful beach town...not a city." The fourth resident stated, "An increase in building height would set a negative precedent."

The meeting's public portion began on a contentious note with back-and-forth between a member of the public and planner/engineer Jennifer Beahm when the resident saw one area on the map designated as being "in need of rehabilitation." "The entire town needs it," he said. Beahm responded that the map is correct for a redevelopment designation, which is separate from a rehabilitation designation, and said further that the rehabilitation area on the map is separate from the highlighted redevelopment.

The resident then asked if "Public Parking Facilities" on the list of permitted uses would be controlled by the Belmar Parking Authority to ensure that a building's owners and tenants don't monopolize "public" parking. Mayor Mark Walsifer responded that the ordinance is about capping the building height at 60 feet and that any details about parking would be addressed "way down the road" under the redevelopment plan. Beahm added that public parking is a permitted use for this zone, with "public parking" to be defined and vetted later in the process.

Once the mayor got the meeting back on track to debate the ordinance, other members of the public expressed their views. Referring to the prospect of a 60-foot building in those three lots, one resident asked, "How is that in the best interests of Belmar? I haven't heard anyone support this ordinance...the council needs to look at whether or not this amendment, based on facts, is in the best interests of Belmar. Or is it in the best interests of people who own the property?"

Another member of the public was adamant that the town is heading in the wrong direction. "Everything we do is always to make it bigger—never to make it smaller, take it down a story, give more parking. Everything is to be bigger, bigger, bigger, which is more cars...we already have flooding and we're going to make it bigger? This is not correct."

The opposite perspective came from an attendee who said she isn't sure where this plan might lead but wanted the council members to know that the people in opposition are the ones voicing their opinions. "A lot of residents are not opposed," she said. "They may not be vocal, but not everybody is against this ordinance."

With the public hearing closed, the council voted 3-2 in a motion to adopt the ordinance. Mayor Walsifer, Councilwoman Jodi Kinney, and Councilman Thomas Carvelli were in favor, and Council President James McCracken and Councilman Thomas Brennan voted against.

Councilman Thomas Brennan acknowledged that "infrastructure is a very valid concern. I know we are voting on height, but this issue would not have come up if a proposal hadn't been presented to the council. The proposal is way too big, and I'm concerned about the number of units. The housing market is on fire, but that kind of thing doesn't last. What is going to happen when the market bottoms out again and people are having trouble selling their properties?"

Councilwoman Jodi Kinney said she knows that many people are not opposed to the height question. "I am for progress, and many people in town are for progress."

Mayor Walsifer shared his view that "to make it look aesthetically nice, these things are needed...This [amendment] sets the parameters of what HAS to be there. It's warranted."

Addressing concerns raised in the meeting, Council President James McCracken shared recent examples of proposals that have been reduced in scope, including the Bank of America project that originally called for "more density, more apartments, less parking...the public was heard, and the administration worked with the developer to reduce the project in size. To say that 'the council is on the side of developers all the time' is just not accurate. This is a highly desirable piece of property, and the owner has the right to develop it. Many developers have told me that this is the most desirable property in Monmouth County. I'm concerned that this ordinance may not get us there. Everyone who has spoken is right, and everyone wants the best for our community."

Greg Waxberg, a writer and magazine editor for The Pingry School, is also an award-winning freelance writer.