

Women's shelter gets council okay

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WEST MILFORD — The recent township council meeting was the forum for an outpouring of emotion from women currently residing at a local shelter and their supporters.

Despite the recommendations of the Planning Board, council members voted 3-2 in favor of changing the village commercial (VC) zone to use a facility on a township throughfare for a shelter to serve disabled and homeless persons and battered women.

Members of the planning board were given 35 days to report their findings to the council and to establish if the proposed ordinance was inconsistent with the Master Plan.

According to Township Attorney Martin Murphy, the planning board unanimously agreed that the ordinance should not be changed and that the location of the shelter was "inappropriate for use of this nature" in a letter issued to the governing body late last month.

Members of the planning board suggested the director of the shelter, Sandy Ramos, apply for a use variance and submit it to the Board of Adjustment. Planning board members strongly felt the location of the shelter to be inappropriate, as it presents a danger to the young children residing at the shelter due to the active traffic patterns existing on the roadway.

Council member Dawn Sharkey disagreed with the Planning Board's concerns regarding the traffic issue and said, "The traffic situation is a concern we have to address, but if we are to be concerned with the children in the community, we would have to outlaw all children in the village commercial zone."

Council member Ernest Fredericks said changing the zone would make the same type of use available to other buildings in the vicinity. "Any store could wind up as such a home," Fredericks said. Conversely, it was for this reason, Councilmember Richard Williams supported the ordinance. "I'm going to vote yes," he said.

Council members Sharkey and Thomas Parisi also voiced their support of the ordinance and felt the location to be ideal because many of the women at the shelter do not own automobiles, some are disabled and some are victims of domestic violence. "Right now, they have access to schools, health clinics, doctors, police protection and shopping areas. In other areas of the township, they would be lost. This zone is the correct zone for it," Parisi said.

Chairperson of the Planning Board Mary Haase addressed the council in defense of the board's recommendation. "I feel for them, no one on the planning board is opposed to the group but to the idea of allowing permitted use in VC zoning. They could go to the Board of Adjustment and get a use variance. I don't see the objection. A zoning change is being discussed tonight, not the use," she said.

"If this goes beyond the council, I'm concerned the idea would be lost," said Sharkey.

"If you're not a part of the

solution," Ramos said, "you're part of the problem. You can't support the concept and tell these women and their children to go home and get beaten and tortured."

Throughout the public hearing on the zone change, several women residing at the shelter and house-mothers spoke in earnest about their need for the establishment. A young township business owner and member of a local fire company also appealed to the council.

"I've been battered all my life and grew up in the city. I'm 21 years old today because of this type of organization. Many of my friends are in jail. If we have a shelter in town, children will be given the opportunity to grow in a safe environment and maybe you'll get more people like me," he said.

Ramos said 75 percent of the residents at the shelter were from the township, stressing the need for this type of facility in the community. Without it, battered and abused township women would be forced to leave their support systems and reside at an overcrowded shelter in

Paterson, taking their children away from their school and friends.

Referring to the war in the Persian Gulf, Ramos said, "In this time of war, we should have some peace at home."

Ramos, a Ringwood resident, said she is waiting for a \$200,000 grant from the state Department of Community Affairs to be used to renovate and upgrade the building and the property. Currently, Save Our Sisters, a group of nearly 25 volunteers guided by Ramos, offer services to about 40 women in the township. The shelter is the only facility of its kind in the upcounty area.

Ramos, a teacher of sociology and anthropology at William Paterson College, Wayne, has been operating shelters for victims of rape, molestation, domestic violence and women temporarily without homes for the past 25 years. In 1988, she opened a shelter in Haskell. Eventually, the shelter moved to Bloomingdale, but a rent hike forced them to look elsewhere.