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A Civic Group Beats Developers to the Punch

By STEWART AIN

GENERALLY when developers buy property, they work with experts to draw up a master plan. But when prospective developers looked at the 325 acres occupied by a sod farm and golf course in Shoreham, they found that residents of the area had beaten them to the punch.

The Shoreham Civic Organization, which has 130 members, developed their own hamlet study in 2002. It was one of the first projects of the group, which was founded in 2000 in response to community opposition to the state's widening of Route 25A, its president, Mary L. Daum, said.

With financing from the Town of Brookhaven, the organization hired Lee E. Koppelman, the executive director of the Long Island Regional Planning Board. "He helped us identify property in the community that was subject to significant development in the future, and the sod farm was one of them," said Dr. Daum, who works at the Brookhaven National Laboratory and has a Ph.D. in geography. "We did an update in March 2004 that included the golf course."

James H. Heil, the organization's vice president, said the idea behind the hamlet study was simply "to get ahead of the developers."

Brian J. Mahoney, a member of the civic group who is also a professional landscape architect, said the hamlet study "was like doing a petition before something happens."

"Instead of the builder coming in and the people then saying, 'We don't want that drive-through,' Shoreham said we need a town center, and this is what it will be," he said. "We don't know of any other development that is creating a town center. People have created shopping malls before, but nothing where people can shop just by walking there. It would be similar to Port Jefferson and Westhampton Beach."

As it turned out, at about the same time that the hamlet study was being finished, two developers, Barnet Holdings of Garden City and the Ornstein Leyton Company of Garden City, were completing the purchase of the Tall Grass Country Club, an 18-hole golf course on 150 acres, and an adjacent 170-acre parcel owned by DeLalio Sod Farm Inc. Both are zoned for single-family homes on one-acre lots.

The developers' proposal calls for 150 five-bedroom single-family houses, 275 houses of different sizes for people 55 and older, and 250 three-bedroom houses that would be built close to the village center.

Based on current market conditions, houses along the golf course are expected to sell for \$750,000 and up. The prices of the other houses have not been determined.

About a third of the 325 acres would be set aside for housing, another third for com-



Photographs by Phil Marino for The New York Times

Randall Road by the DeLalio Sod Farm is the western border of the 325-acre tract proposed for development in Shoreham. Lawrence S. Feldman, far left in foreground, the developers' lawyer, discusses the proposal with residents.



mercial development and the rest for open space: the golf course will remain, and a ball field and a park will be added. The project is expected to take three to five years to complete.

"We started talking to the community right after we closed," said Lawrence S. Feldman, the developers' lawyer and a partner in Farrell Fritz, the Melville firm.

The tract is bounded by Route 25A on the north, Randall Road on the west, and a number of homes on the east, including some under construction. It is 1.3 miles west of William Floyd Parkway.

The developers' planners, Dover, Kohl & Partners of Coral Gables, Fla., borrowed from the hamlet study in formulating their master plan. "We certainly like the overall concept, which after all was ours," Dr. Daum, the civic group's president, said with a chuckle. "It's an integrated mixed-use development. We like what they have done in terms of the site design and their ideas" about architectural plans.

Alex Ornstein, a principal in the Ornstein Leyton Company, said there was "definitely more of a partnership in this project than one might ordinarily see."

"But here an organized civic association undertook the quite arduous task of a hamlet study, and we think their ideas make sense on our property," he said. "We have a nice symbiotic relationship."

The hamlet study was developed after a survey was sent to nearly 3,600 households in Shoreham, the part of Wading River that

is in the Town of Brookhaven and the Leisure Glen development in Ridge.

"We had a 10 percent response rate, which is very good and indicates that the results of the survey are statistically significant," Dr. Daum said.

Mr. Mahoney, the landscape architect, said the survey "found that many people wanted a town center because Shoreham doesn't have a downtown."

Mr. Feldman, the developers' lawyer, said they envision a 170,000-square-foot village with a restaurant, supermarket, arts center, a community center, ice cream parlor, bakery and professional offices.

Bruce Barnet, the president and chief executive of Barnet Holdings, said the downtown area had to have "enough critical mass to make people want to go there routinely."

Mr. Mahoney said that if approved, "this would be the first planned district development of this type in the Town of Brookhaven" and perhaps Long Island.

The developers met with about 300 residents for 30 hours over two days in October to explain their plans and get feedback. During the meeting a number of people complained about the proposed location of the sewage treatment plant. Dr. Daum said she saw Mr. Barnett "sit down with another guy, pull out a site map and figure out where they could move the sewage treatment plant."

"That said to me that he was listening to what people said and that he wanted to accommodate what people preferred to see on that site," she said. "They are not trying to

shove this down people's throats."

But Kevin T. McCarrick, who represents the Shoreham area on the Brookhaven Town Board and in the Suffolk County Legislature said he had reservations about the project because it would not be profitable unless there were many more than the 287 homes the developers can build under current zoning.

Mr. McCarrick explained that the Shoreham-Wading River Central School District is "very sensitive to density because of the cost of education," which he put at almost \$15,000 per student.

"If there are two students in a house, that's \$30,000," he said. "Even if taxes were as high as \$18,000, the school district might only receive \$14,000 or \$15,000 and with two kids in the house, the district is already behind."

If the population figures proved correct, the only way the school district would be able to make up the deficit would be to increase real estate taxes. But Mr. Barnet, the developer, contends that tax revenues generated by the proposed development would more than pay for its students. He said his projections indicate that the community would have 370 students, because of the age restrictions on some of the owners and because some of the units would be smaller than "family size."

"Smaller homes statistically yield fewer school-age children," Mr. Feldman pointed out.

Mr. Barnet said the golf course alone would generate \$200,000 a year in taxes, and that overall, taxes from the development would result in a "positive tax base of \$386,000 per year as opposed to a deficit of \$2,233,000" if the 287 single-family homes were built. "There would be no other income to the school if we built the 287 homes," he explained.