

Scotch Plains Board of Adjustment Approves Public Storage Appeal Over Residents' Protests

By DEBORAH MADISON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — Amidst angry jeers of protest and outcries of disbelief from residents, the Scotch Plains Board of Adjustment unanimously voted on Thursday to approve an application by Public Storage, Inc. for a self-storage facility to be located on Route 22 and Myrtle Avenue.

Public Storage, a nationwide chain of self-storage facilities, applied for a D-variance and several bulk variances to build a three-story, 75,000-square-foot facility, housing 544 self-storage units. The two-and-half acre parcel of land, which previously housed a car dealership, abuts a residential neighborhood and 11 houses on Myrtle, Maven and Mountain Avenues.

An initial application filed by Public Storage in 1998 was denied by the board in 2000. A second application applied for in 2000 was heard before the board over the course of three meetings, which resulted in Thursday's approval. Public Storage made extensive changes to the second application, taking into account recommendations from the board and from neighboring residents, which were incorporated into the revised plans. Those changes significantly reduced the overall footprint of the building's size and increased the landscaped buffer around the perimeter of the property to minimize the visual impact of the large building on the surrounding neighborhood.

One of the bulk variances was for non-permitted story levels; Even though one of the stories is below ground, the building was still considered to be three stories in a zone that only permits of two and a half stories. The other bulk variance was required for the proposed free-standing sign on Route 22.

The approval was predicated on a long list of conditions, including replacing the objectionable logo-colors of purple and orange with subdued earth-tones for the exterior of the building, installing a drainage system to alleviate flooding in the area, and giving the board final say in the design elements of a free-standing sign. Other conditions were also attached to the approval.

Along with a larger-than-required landscaped buffer, Public Storage was granting an easement on their property for the use by the abutting home owners, as an extension of their own yards. This easement will result in an increased value of the neighboring properties, according to Public Storage attorney, Richard McComber, while the burden of the taxes and insurance liability remains the responsibility of Public Storage.

Throughout the six-hour long

meeting, which ran into the wee hours of the morning, residents vocalized adamant objections to the location of the facility. The residents maintained that the proposed facility would impose more traffic, glaring lights, late-night noise and other detrimental impacts on their already overburdened neighborhood. Many of the residents demanded that the experts address the potential rise in rodents, crime and devaluation of property values in other neighborhoods that abutted Public Storage facilities, which the experts repeatedly denied.

Compromised safety regarding the potential of stored explosives and other hazardous materials was also a chief concern raised by community members.

One of the major points made by all of the experts testifying on behalf of Public Storage and reiterated by the board was that this type of facility would have less of a detrimental impact on the residential community, compared to other types of commercial uses permitted in that zone. Permitted uses for this property, located in a B-3 commercial zone, include fast food restaurants, movie theaters, strip malls, grocery/convenience stores or liquor stores.

Expert witness for the applicant, Real Estate Appraiser Denise Smith, presented the findings of two studies, which she conducted of other residential neighborhoods, similar in character to the Myrtle Avenue neighborhood, which abutted self-storage facilities.

According to Mrs. Smith, she could find no significant devaluation of property values of homes in neighborhoods, which had these types of facilities.

Board Chairman James Fawcett and many members of the public disagreed with Mrs. Smith's findings, declaring that an abutting self-storage facility was obviously a devaluing factor, when comparing

homes similar in all other aspects. However, Mr. Fawcett pointed out that the key issue was whether some other type of business would be more or less of a detriment to property values and quality of life.

Residents questioned the board as to why the land couldn't be purchased by the town and maintained as a passive park or purchased by a church.

Mr. Fawcett explained that the property was a piece of prime commercial real estate, valued at over \$2.5 million and for this reason, no town or church could afford to purchase the land for the types of passive uses suggested by residents. Furthermore, Mr. Fawcett explained, developers had certain rights, which the board was legally compelled to uphold.

"If we don't have good reasons for denying this application, the applicant can reverse our decision on appeal in court," Mr. Fawcett explained to the distraught crowd. "Our decision has to be based on sound reasons and has to meet certain criteria or it will be overturned. Property owners and developers have certain rights too."

Residents were obviously distraught and vocalize their consternation over the seeming discrepancies in the board's denial of other commercial developments in other residential neighborhoods, such as their denial of a nursing home on Martine Avenue in 1999, and the board's denial of a mini-strip mall for the Park Place property on Raritan Road in 2000.

Many residents said that they would find another car dealership or a restaurant more desirable because of a number of safety factors.

"These types of facilities bring a lot of undesirable people and more crime into the surrounding neighborhoods," Myrtle Avenue resident Karen Cunningham remarked.

"They (Public Storage) have not satisfactorily answered our questions regarding how the facility will pre-

vent the storage of hazardous materials," Myrtle Avenue resident Charles Mayo commented.

The board cited the applicant's willingness and cooperation to incorporate the board's and the residents recommendations into the revised plans, as one of the reasons for their approval. Other reasons included the residential-like architectural features, the flooding-drainage solutions and the land-amenement benefits as reasons for their approval.



Courtesy of Westfield Fire Department
MAKING USE OF NEW PUMPER...Westfield firefighters battled a garage fire Wednesday, January 31, on Clark Street. The firefighters encountered heavy smoke and fire conditions upon entering the garage. Pictured operating the town's newly purchased fire pumper truck is firefighter Michael Giordano.

Friends of Lenape Park to Host Bird Walk, Bluebird Project on Saturday, February 17

CRANFORD — The Friends of Lenape Park, in cooperation with the Union County Department of Parks and Recreation, will host a winter bird walk on Saturday, February 17, beginning at 9 a.m.

Many bird species over-winter at Lenape Park, and the lack of foliage makes it easier to find the birds feeding on seeds, berries, burrowing bugs and even other birds.

Nuthatches, finches, hawks and more can be expected. A limited number of binoculars will be available for use. The walk will begin at the Trap & Skeet Range parking lot located off of Kenilworth Boulevard in Cranford. The event will be canceled in the event of rain.

Also on February 17, Friends of Lenape Park will kick-off Project Bluebird for 2001. Volunteers are needed to renovate and expand the bluebird trail established last year at the park. Last year, the trail consisted of five nest boxes which were monitored from March until July.

As many as five more boxes will be added depending on the number of volunteers available to monitor the nests. Bluebirds are expected to arrive in the area by mid-March.

Friends of Lenape Park is an organization dedicated to protecting and enhancing native biodiversity at Lenape Park, an important wetland and oasis of wildlife in Union County. With the assistance of the Union County Department of Parks and Recreation, Friends of Lenape Park has established a bird inventory for Lenape Park including over 200 species, erected and maintained a bluebird trail, and begun removal of foreign invasive plant species from the park, replacing them with native plants and shrubs.

Future projects include an inventory of reptiles and amphibians, and continued removal of non-native plants.

For more information, please contact Friends of Lenape Park at lenapepark@aol.com; P.O. Box 289, 16 South Avenue West, Cranford, 07016, or by calling (908) 687-2169.

The Friends of Lenape Park can be reached on the Internet at http://hometown.aol.com/Lenapepark1/.

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