

As seen in

# The Bernardsville News

bernardsvillenews.com

FEBRUARY 22, 2016

Reprinted Article

## Letter to the Editor: Multi-use proposal would 'change the character' of Bedminster

EDITOR: At the January 2016 Bedminster Land Use Board meeting, Advance Realty of Bridgewater proposed the construction of seven new buildings on the tract now occupied by the former Forbes building.

The project requires multiple variances that deviate greatly from what our ordinances allow: residential and retail use, currently zoned only for office space; building height, 132 percent of the maximum; ground coverage, 235 percent of the maximum; floor area ratio, 283 percent of the maximum; property setbacks, front and rear fall short by 90 percent and 12 percent of the minimum, respectively; and parking spaces, 24 percent less than the minimum.

Presumably, there would need to be a strong underlying reason to grant one or more variances for this project, which the developer asserts is in the best interest of Bedminster.

Advance pitched their idea as a

solution to a compound problem that plagues not just Bedminster, but towns throughout the country. A changing work environment - offshoring, telecommuting, etc. - and the need to cut costs has companies trying to offload larger office space. Also, workers who years ago migrated to the suburbs are finding their jobs moved back to major cities or relocated to lower-cost states.

As a result, towns face lower tax rates and budget shortfalls. The Advance plan looks to address this issue by creating a "village" that features office, residential, retail and restaurant space on one campus, emulating what might be found in more metropolitan areas - e.g., Hoboken - an appealing environment for businesses and their workers, particularly millennials.

While sometimes a viable alternative, multi-purpose applications require significant space and an infrastructure capable of supporting such diverse uses.

Potential gains in tax revenue may easily be dwarfed by the demands such a development makes on limited municipal resources, including schools, police, fire, roadways and sewage. In addition, increases in traffic, noise, pollution and other negative environmental impacts must be considered.

The economic equation of tax increases vs. attracting new business at the expense of quality of life is not a simple one to balance. There are no silver bullets, and the Advance proposal is no exception.

In attempting to shoehorn this design into a 15-acre parcel, the proponents have largely ignored its effects on the surrounding community. The plans feature period appropriate colonial architecture, but, as dad used to say, "You can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig."

This author would argue that the proposed development more likely resembles a hog when it comes to the burden it will place on our town. *(Con't on next pg.)*

- Located in one of the most heavily traveled corridors in Bedminster, it will not only increase traffic to and from the site, but radically change its frequency and distribution. Whereas the current occupants are predominantly "arrive at 9" and "leave at 5" tenants, the multi-use configuration creates a seven days a week, 24 hour a day, traffic pattern at our northern crossroads, significantly impacting local residents, school buses, commuters and anyone driving across town.
- On-site merchants will place increased demand on municipal services, including sewage, fire and policing. Do we really need to construct new space to accommodate another restaurant? Another retailer? Currently, one need walk no farther than Main Street or Hills Drive to see available attractive spaces fully capable of serving commercial needs.
- The size and scope of the project ignores property offsets and impervious coverage. Displacing grass and trees with buildings and asphalt may cause runoff that harms adjoining neighbors. The environmental impact of increased traffic and pollution, coupled with the removal of natural buffers and landscaping, reveals a project that is green only for the developer.
- The residential apartments, designed to attract young families, will place a heavy burden on a stellar school system already constrained by a tight budget. Not

only will enrollment and class size increase, but so too will demand for costly adjunct services, such as the care of those with learning disabilities and special needs. Faced with state-mandated caps on how much the town may increase real estate taxes per annum, the school would be funded less per student, and the quality of education would suffer. Toward the end of Advance's presentation, one astute resident, seeing mostly pavement in the developer's renderings, asked, "Where will the children play?" Should Bedminster approve this proposal, another question might be "What will the town's people pay?"

Following decades of sustained build-out, it is not the job of taxpayers to bail out real estate developers who have suffered a downturn. While dire claims of a 50-year inventory for office space abound, free markets are wonderfully self-correcting systems. Through mechanisms including refinancing, reorganization and business recombination, excess inventories will eventually be whittled down, and the market will re-calibrate.

Advance's proposal, while implying tax revenue increases, flies squarely in the face of Bedminster's master plan, and would ultimately change the character of our community.

Municipalities and developers are best served when economic, demographic, environmental and quality of life interests are tightly

aligned. The Land Use Board should seek input from residents, local businesses and real estate experts to help determine what adjustments, if any, need to be made to our Master Plan before considering substantial departures.

I encourage my fellow residents to attend the next meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday, March 3, at the Bedminster Municipal Building. Listen carefully, make your own determination and then, most importantly, be heard.

R. COLIN HICKEY  
Bedminster Township

*Editor's note: This Letter to the Editor can be found on The Bernardsville News website by clicking [here](#).*