

BESIDE Cabins project falls through

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By Matt Shortall

BETHEL — BESIDE Habitat, a company based out of Québec, Canada, has been proposing a camping development on Pine Grove Road just outside of Smallwood in the Town of Bethel. Alix Ouellet, Vice President of BESIDE, told the Democrat that those plans have been scrapped.

“Things have moved [on] because, unfortunately, the long approval process with the town is making us run out of time and the owner of the property decided not to renew the sales contract,” Ouellet said. “It’s sad because it was a lot of work, but we wish the best for this land and for the people of Smallwood.”

Carol Malek, a Smallwood resident and realtor for the property owner, told the Democrat that her client received a higher, no contingency offer and the contract for BESIDE was running out.

The BESIDE project has been a controversial topic in Smallwood. The Smallwood Civic Association and the Smallwood Aware Residents Team (SmART) organized over the past several months to oppose the development, showing up in large numbers at a town planning board meeting last December when BESIDE was on the agenda.

“Put simply, this is environmentally sensitive land, part of an important watershed and worthy of conservation,” said Sharon Silverman, SmART Steering Committee member. “If developed as proposed, this massive

development will have significant adverse effects on the hamlet of Smallwood and our lake. For this and reasons related to Smallwood's population density and substandard road system, we believe this is the wrong project for the wrong part of town."

BESIDE developers said their project would have preserved the majority of the 800-acre property, also known as Hemp Meadow Estates. The 200 acres they planned to develop would've contained single-family cabins on five-acre lots as well as other short-term rentals and camping amenities.

Concerned Residents said they're not opposed to development, but were opposed to the location of this particular project.

Lawn signs have appeared along roadways and in front of homes in Smallwood over the past several weeks saying the project would pollute the nearby lake, build a recreational vehicle (RV) Park, cause excessive traffic and other detrimental impacts.

Ouellet pushed back against that characterization.

She said there was never any plan to include an RV park, but their type of project falls under Chapter 120 of Bethel's Town Code entitled "Campgrounds and Recreational Vehicle Parks."

"There was a lot of misinformation going on," Ouellet said.

Some Smallwood residents remained skeptical.

"Property rights travel with approvals," said Clay Ruede, SmART Steering Committee Member. "As it stands now, under Bethel's zoning, the application for the campsites as part of this project would allow for an RV park. Should the developer sell or convey the rights to this project, a future owner or operator who has made no representation that there will not be an RV park could then use the property in this manner. Barring an explicitly stated prohibition on the site plan, an RV park is in the offing."

Bethel Supervisor Daniel Sturm said that the next step in the project would've been BESIDE appearing before the town board to seek a waiver regarding their septic system, but that was before BESIDE told the Democrat they were moving on.

Sturm said he would make a statement regarding BESIDE at the next town board meeting.

Any future plans for the property were unclear as of presstime, but Smallwood residents remain concerned about population density and the local watershed.

"We think it is advisable, necessary, and entirely viable that the 800 acres of Hemp Meadow Estates become part of a forever wild or some other kind of conservation easement," Silverman said.

"The Smallwood Civic Association is committed to the long-term sustainability of Mountain Lake and its Ecosystem," said Civic Association President Jonathan Hyman. "We are a lake community and without it we are just another development."

Hyman said that, even prior to the BESIDE project, their board was engaged in water testing and other issues related to the health of Mountain Lake.

"Any effort at land preservation that provides a buffer for our lake is something the Civic Association supports," Hyman said.

Ouellet said that BESIDE is considering other properties in New York, but there's nothing currently confirmed.

"In a perfect world, this land would be 100 percent protected," Ouellet said. "We think that our conservation ratio was probably the second best scenario. We just hope that the property is going to fall into good hands."