Tussle on Town Street

A plan by the Cornwall Housing Corporation (CHC) to provide affordable housing near the north end of Town Street — one house on a one-and-a-half-acre site — has drawn sharp criticism from four neighboring landowners.

The protesters are Peggy and Ralph Brown, Tinka and Allan Denenberg, Susan and Eugene Flamm, and Vivian and Jeffrey Gordon. At a meeting with CHC directors, and in subsequent letters to CHC president Ken Keskinen, they argued that, among other things, the projected housing would impair the area’s quiet rural atmosphere and depress property values. They also complained, as the Browns put it, that “at present, at least, the project does seem to be being imposed on the neighborhood against its will.”

The Town Street site was part of the property of Joe and Ann Blumenthal, who expressed a wish before their death last year that it be made available to a family who could not otherwise afford to live in Cornwall. The Blumenthals, who also left approximately $150,000 to the town for affordable housing, died before the transfer of the site could be effected. But Ella Clark, who bought the Blumenthal property, has enthusiastically agreed to honor their wish.

Normal CHC procedure would be to offer a 99-year free leasehold on the property to an eligible person or family of moderate income — not more than about $51,000 for a family of four. However, CHC is exploring the possibility of giving the site to Habitat for Humanity. Using volunteer labor and donated money and materials, Habitat would build a house on the property and turn it over, with a zero-interest mortgage, to a low-income family — the ceiling for a family of four would in this case be about $21,000 — who would agree to contribute 400-500 hours of labor toward building the house.

Among the points made by one or more of the four neighboring landowners were these:

- That a less isolated site, nearer to stores and other facilities, would be more appropriate for a low-income family.
- That Planning and Zoning’s decision in 1989 to permit affordable housing on suitable sites as small as one acre regardless of existing zoning restrictions was a bad mistake, underestimating the vested rights of property owners in 3- and 5-acre residential zones.
- That this change in zoning regulations opens the way to undesirable mass construction by unscrupulous developers.

In a letter to the landowners, Ken Keskinen, who was a close neighbor of the Blumenthals and is co-executor of their estate, said that while Town Street is “my neighborhood too,” there is “a larger neighborhood of Cornwall that has come to be equally important to me.”

The CHC will hold a public meeting at the Town Hall on Saturday, Nov. 9, at 10:30 a.m., to answer questions about the Town Street property — it is expected that a site plan will be ready by then — as well as about the CHC’s overall program and general land-use issues. — Spencer Klaw

Shame, Shame!

It is reported in the Hartford Times that ‘hordes of men’ were led up to the polls and a democratic majority of 73 was made Republican. This sounds a little odd to us, for if the census can be relied on, there isn't one fair sized horde in the whole town. Moreover, that this town ever had a real democratic majority remains to be proved. Bribery has so long controlled our local politics, that party principles are entirely ignored by a large number of voters, and promises made in 1991 are not meant to be kept.

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The ZBA is authorized to overturn or amend a P&Z decision only when it finds such decision in error vis-à-vis the Cornwall Zoning Regulations. At issue in this case was whether a convenience store would be less non-conforming than the present garage is. (Zoning regulations stipulate that no change in a non-conforming land use can be made unless the new use is less non-conforming that the existing one.) The ZBA looked at the hours of operation, building alterations, and the intensity of use as well as the parking spaces — which they reduced from 24 to 14 — before making their determination. Board alternate Don Bardot likened the definition of a "less non-conforming use" to the definition of pornography: "no one can describe it to universal satisfaction, but everyone thinks he knows it when he sees it."

Alternate Nick Edler and Chairperson Norma Lake voted in the minority. Norma held that the hours of operation, 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., were excessive and constituted a more non-conforming use. — Scoville Soule

Town Meeting Buys 5-Year Plan

The Board of Finance and the selectmen faced the future at the annual town meeting on Oct. 25 and received unanimous support for their long-range recommendations. The necessary reconstruction of roads and bridges; Rumsey and Town Hall expenses; the Fire Dept.; town highway and ambulance vehicle replacement accounted for the bulk of anticipated expenditures. The five-year total cost to implement the plan — assuming the world stands still in every other way — would be $3,213,000. State funding is figured in at $743,000, and available town moneys on hand are $1,090,000. Total taxes to make up the difference would be $1,380,000 — an average yearly tax-rate increase of .5 mills.

The Five-Year Plan is the result of a full year's work primarily by Ralph Gold and Hendon Chubb of the Board of Finance and the three selectmen. It is to be reviewed and revised annually.

Other routine matters on the agenda were approved with little questioning and no dispute. The Rev. Peter Hammond moderated, which may account in part for this unusual equanimity. And a mathematical wizard in the rear of the room, Celia Senzer, brought the theoretical tax-rate increase down from 1.30 mills to .5 mills by pointing out a mistake in the Board of Finance's arithmetic — which also soothed the citizens.

— Scoville Soule

Lions, Anyone?

As woods take over abandoned fields, wildlife has been returning to Cornwall. We have coyotes, turkeys, black bears — and now there is strong evidence that mountain lions are living in some of the town's wilder areas.

The first known sighting was three years ago when Mary Lee, who spends summer vacations here, was walking on a state-forested road behind Yelling Hill in the pouring rain. As she reports: "A mountain lion crossed the road about 100 feet away from me, just walking, not noticing me because of the rain. It was unmistakable; short, tawny hair, roundish ears, looking exactly like a small lion. I had no idea lions were in the area, so there was no question of my conjuring this up to fit my expectations."

The next summer, Gillian MacDonald saw a mountain lion in the same area, back of Yelling Hill. Hers was in the meadow behind her house, and she watched it from her terrace, transfixed, for a good five minutes. The animal at first was sitting, and then got up, revealing its long tail, and calmly walked across the meadow into the woods. Gillian's description is the same — a very large, tawny cat with a long, long tail.

Lisa Lansing, who lives on Dibble Hill, saw a mountain lion (or puma, or cougar — the names are interchangeable) this spring while looking out her kitchen window, and her description, too, is identical. Various Cornwall Bridge residents recall hearing an eerie night-time scream, typical of the lion, up in the woods behind town.

The Department of Environmental Protection reports that there has been no authenticated sighting of an eastern cougar, as the DEP calls it, in New England in 75 years. However, Douglas Radziejewicz, the Environmental Education Specialist at the Sharon Audubon Center, says, "Personally, I believe mountain lions are surviving around here." He has had reports from Kent as well as Cornwall. The animal is extremely reclusive, he says, and not in the least aggressive toward people. What the DEP accepts as an authenticated sighting is a photograph, the plaster mold of a footprint, or a kill which has been carefully covered over by branches and twigs, which is the way a mountain lion hides food that it can't eat all at once.

Anyone else seen a mountain lion/conger/puma?

— Barbara Klaw
The Hughes Memorial Library

The bronze tablet on the east wall of the main room is inscribed, "In memory of George and Mary Volmiller Hughes, and the happy days when they dwelt here. This building, for nearly a century the village school, was given by their son to the West Cornwall Library Association."

The main library room is small and homey. On the west wall are two large original paintings by Arlington Yutzler. On the opposite wall, the big old Housatonic railroad clock which hung for years in the station agent's office at the depot.

The pleasant room across the hall was used a great deal in earlier times. There were card parties, birthday and Halloween celebrations and club meetings. Many old books retired to this room. Zane Grey and Jack London and Horatio Alger books. Complete sets of Dickens and Ruskin. Now we have new bookcases installed for young people's books and for mysteries. And lots of books for sale. This is a sociable place. People feel free to come in and talk. Others join in. Problems of the town, state and nation are solved here!

More than a word of appreciation should go to Arlington and Myrtle Yutzler who for years carried on all the work that goes with running a library. They said it was their contribution to the community; likewise, Kenny Whitney, making bookcases and doing all the lawn work; and the Beckers, installing the lighting. Our present librarian, Peg Becker maintains it with fidelity, ever alert for what people want to read. If you didn't know us before, here we are!

— Doris Hart Cross

Sawmill Approved

After reviewing the comments from last month's hearing on Lawrence Stevens' application for a limited-use sawmill, P & Z members voted unanimously to approve the application as it complied with all requirements. Listed and limited by the detailed site plan are truck size, number of trips per week, equipment and accumulated amounts of slab and sawdust; also, buffered trees and the access driveway are described. The sound emitted by the sawmill will be measured again when it is located in its building to assure that the decibel level stays below the legal limit.

— Ginny Potter

Wild Grapes - Great Jam

This was a remarkable year for wild grapes along our roads. By early October my neighbor, Anne Chamberlain, and I had put up an enormous amount of tartish grape jam with an un-Welch flavor not to be believed. I always keep an eye on local grape vines and most years we get from nothing to a few dried up, unhappy grapes. This year was different. Maybe it was the April rain or a very warm spring, but the fruit formed early and you could see the bunches hanging out to ripen as Labor Day approached. Pritchard Road and Brick School House Road (Warren) provided us with more than enough fruit. We hardly touched the tiny (fox) grapes. The larger varieties were abundant and much easier to work with. We made jam using a food mill rather than the jelly route of slow dripping through cheese cloth. The abundant and delicious result of our efforts is nothing short of awesome so forgive us if we boast a bit over the winter.

— John Miller

Cornwall Highlights

★ Sam Waterston stars in a new weekly television series about a small town family in the South in the 1950s as the civil rights movement gets into gear. Tuesdays at 8 p.m. on NBC. Rave reviews.

★ Joelle Sander has written Before Their Time about four generations of black women in one family all of whom became teenage mothers. A great-grandmother, grandmother, mother and daughter speak out. Published this month by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

★ Charles Van Doren is the author of A History of Knowledge: Past, Present and Future, published earlier this year by the Carol Publishing Group. The book is an account of the growth of human knowledge over 10,000 years and a forecast of future growth. A paperback edition of the book will be published next month by Ballantine.

★ Now available at Cornwall Library is the first edition of Fiddlesticks, an audio/literary magazine of poetry, fiction and commentary by Cornwall authors. Volume one contains a piece by Ken Keskinen about a plot to subvert baseball in Minnesota in 1934, and fiction of Earl Brecher that pokes fun at local government and the Torrington Area Health District. Contributions by Cornwall writers are solicited.

★ Fighting Ships of the Revolution on Long Island Sound 1775-1783 by J. Lawrence Pool describes naval combat on the Sound and land battles when British and Tory ships crossed to Connecticut and patriot ships and whale boats engaged the British privateers. Plunder, and even hostages, were taken. An account of the burning of New London by Benedict Arnold.

★ Cornwall Housing Comm. is solving the problem of owner-built housing. There may be a few more homes to be built, but that may be part of insuring that paradise survives. — Gordon Ridgway

CHEERS FOR DICK DAKIN, ET AL.

Richard Dakin is deserving of re-election to the office of First Selectman in Cornwall. Dick has worked tirelessly for the past two terms to address Cornwall's problems, and will continue to do so. Dick's experience and desire to work for what is best for the town as a whole make him the best qualified candidate. Now more than ever, in these times of state economic trouble, Cornwall needs a full-time, dedicated First Selectman. Dick, Bill Harburt, Barbara Dakin, Klaus (Nick) Erler and the rest of the Republican slate of candidates in Cornwall are dedicated to providing solutions to Cornwall's ongoing needs in a cost-effective manner. They deserve your support.

— Charlie Yohe

100 ON 100?

Dick and Susan Frank asked the question in the October Chronicle "if someone donates 100 acres (to the Cornwall Housing Comm.) does that mean that theoretically there could be 100 houses built on 1-acre each?"

The answer, of course, is no, because there are zoning ordinances dealing with setbacks from property lines, from roads, plus wetlands and septic requirements.

The tone of the Franks' letter seems to suggest that the Cornwall Housing Comm. is going to ruin Cornwall. In fact it should allow younger people, teachers, artists, writers, and generally less well-off folks to live in the community. I like that.

— John Miller

WEEKENDS FOR RELAXING

I am opposed to Mr. & Mrs. Frank's suggestion that we conduct important town business when it is convenient for weekenders to attend. After working all week, often with evening town board and committee meetings, I feel it only amiable that we leave weekends so ALL may relax.

— Gary J. Heaney
Night Skiing? Yes!
This Year? " Possibly"

On Oct. 10, the Department of Environmental protection finally gave its blessing to night skiing at Mohawk. The authorization specifically states that skiing is to remain Mohawk's overriding purpose and that any usage of the facility must be compatible with the rural, residential character of the community in which it is situated.

Referring to technical problems in installing lights, Carol Lugar, Mohawk president, said, "If we can pull it all together, we hope to have a grand opening ceremony of night skiing the weekend before Christmas." Regular skiing will begin at Thanksgiving as usual if weather permits, she added.

At the second information meeting on Oct. 4, which drew about 90 people to Town Hall, great sheets of information about every issue disputed at the first night-skiing meeting were presented by Lugar and Peter Ebersol for Mohawk, and by various DEP officials. The salient facts that emerged are:
1) The ski area will be open until 10 p.m. six nights a week (not on Sundays).
2) No alcohol will be sold.
3) Eleven of the area's 23 trails will be lighted, covering about 75% of its skiable slopes. Lights will be low, sweeping across and down the trails, at about one twentieth the intensity of the lighting at an outdoor swimming pool.
4) Tickets will be sold for six different periods of the day, spreading out the times at which cars arrive and depart and ending the surge of traffic at 4 p.m., the present closing time.
5) Cafeteria hours will be extended for night skiers, but the type of food will remain the same — no fancy restaurant fare.
6) The septic system (described in numbing detail) is more than adequate to take care of night skiers.
7) Mohawk now has room for 1,250 cars, and full capacity has seldom been needed. With staggered arrival and departures, parking is deemed no problem.
8) Noise will be reduced with the installation of new electrical snow-making equipment, which will also cut energy consumption by 80%.
9) Night skiing will provide 35 to 50 new jobs at Mohawk, which is already Cornwall's largest employer.

In a frank survey of Mohawk's financial position, Lugar explained that while Mohawk is the largest of Connecticut's five ski areas, it attracts the fewest skiers, and is the only one that doesn't have night skiing. Night skiing, she projects, will increase business by 35%, bringing in gross revenues of $450,000 per ski season, which will yield about $100,000 net after payments are deducted for long-term indebtedness.

Only two questioners still expressed reservations after the lengthy presentations and resident Gisela Lichtenberger ended the questions by saying, "Mohawk is a state park, a STATE park. We shouldn't be selfish."

Both selectmen said they now supported night skiing and felt that thrashing out the whole issue had generated better understanding between the DEP and the town.

— Barbara Klaw

Events & Announcements

Gather Together: The annual ecumenical service of Cornwall's three churches will be held Thanksgiving Eve, Nov. 27th, at 7:30 p.m. at the United Church of Christ. The choir will be made up of the choirs from the three churches and all others who would like to sing. There will be one rehearsal at 6:30 p.m. on the evening of the service. For further information call 672-6133.

Rejoice Ye Fox Trotters: And now a secular note — the Cornwall Volunteer Fire Dept. will hold its annual Firemen's Ball on Saturday, Nov. 16th, from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. at Mohawk Ski Lodge featuring a local band called Silverflame. (Oh for the days when bands had simple names like Spike Jones and His City Slickers). Well, anyway, we're told Silverflame provides a variety of music, which is more than you could say for Spike Jones. Ticket prices are $20 per couple and additional tickets can be purchased at the door. This is a great event and the proceeds support the Fire Dept. and the Rescue Squad.

Political Parties: If you're watching your waistlines beware. The Cornwall Democrats are throwing a pre-election party for their candidates for first selectman and selectman, Gordon Ridgway and Dave Williamson, at Cadwell's Corner Saturday evening at 7:30 p.m. Dessert, coffee and music provided. The Republican Town Committee is throwing a pre-election bash (coffee, cider & apple pie) for all voters also at Cadwell's on Sunday, Nov. 3, from 3 to 5 p.m. The local GOPers say "bring the kids. We'll have something special for them too." All this is fine but where can a hungry voter go for a free main course to balance all this and cake?

Fiber Artists Hark: Diane Ingersoll (6442) and Carey McDonald (2777) are looking for people interested in forming a Cornwall Fiber Arts Guild.

That means all ye knitters, spinners, weavers and crocheters (at least)! There will be a meeting for those interested at 7 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 14th at the Ingersoll house on Town Street.

Domestic violence, its forms and causes, will be the subject of a talk by Audrey Levine, program director of Women's Emergency Services of Sharon, at 11:15 a.m. on Sunday, Nov. 3rd, at the United Church of Christ.

Parents Take Note: Pre-school testing for three- and four-year-olds will take place at Cornwall Consolidated on the first Thursdays of every month. The process is to assess the developmental level of each future student. Parents should call 672-6617 for an appointment.