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Franklin Twp. wrangles over housing Political disputes threatening to scuttle plan for state council

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Franklin Township's affordable housing plan is in a holding pattern, as time pressure complicates the council's plan to quietly resolve political disputes. Signaling a temporary peace Tuesday night, the council named zoning board chairman Bob Thomas to the planning board over Michael Orsini.

But in a surprise move, the council then reappointed Orsini, whom Councilwoman Ellen Ritchie had threatened with ouster. The loser in the musical chairs was another board member, Joe Danielsen, who was not reappointed. "I didn't know until the vote," Orsini said. "In fact, after the first vote it didn't look good."

But the real issue remains — whether to include a large development proposal by Middlesex County builder Jack Morris in the plan required to meet the township's legal obligation to provide roughly 530 new homes for low- and moderate-income people. Last month, the planning board voted to drop the proposal because of environmental questions about the site, between Veronica Avenue and Bennetts Lane. But the council reversed that decision, sending the plan to the state Council on Affordable Housing with the Morris plan included.

The decision had consequences, as a group of residents announced plans to sue and Somerset County Prosecutor Wayne Forrest launched an investigation into Ritchie's threat against Orsini that his vote to drop the Morris component would be the end of his political career.

Under COAH rules, planning boards normally write affordable housing plans and submit them to the state with the endorsement of their governing bodies. The Franklin split presented the agency with a unique situation, said Township Attorney Louis Rainone.

The council asked COAH for a waiver to allow it to submit its version of the plan. In a Dec. 28 directive, the agency told the council it needed more documentation. It gave the council until Feb. 11, a Saturday, to either resolve the dispute or submit a new waiver request.

In a raucous discussion Tuesday night, the council decided to appoint a subcommittee to negotiate privately with planning board representatives. Rainone proposed himself, Township Manager Ken Daly, Mayor Brian Levine and three members apiece from the council and planning board, "definitely not enough that there's a quorum" that would require that the meeting be open to the public, he said.

Councilman James Vassanella, who abstained on last month's vote, said such secrecy had given rise to "misinformation" that led to the Ritchie-Orsini dispute and public outcry. "If we put 25 people in a room, we won't reach agreement," Rainone said, adding that if the meeting were public, "we'd be negotiating in front of a roomful of developers."

Planning board chairman Ted Chase said the negotiations should not take place before Wednesday's board meeting, which already has been advertised as concerning the master plan. As a result, Rainone said it is likely that both the board and council will need to schedule meetings late this month. The council authorized him to submit a new waiver application to COAH.

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