

Shake-up on Planning Board

Ouster follows Franklin housing spat

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FRANKLIN — A Planning Board member who spoke out against Township Council members and their changes to municipality's affordable-housing plan failed to win reappointment to the board.

Joe Danielsen, whose term expired Dec. 31, received no votes at Tuesday's council meeting after Mayor Brian Levine nominated him for reappointment. Meanwhile, Planning Board Vice Chairman Mike Orsini, who also opposed the council's plan, was reappointed. Zoning Board Chairman Robert Thomas will fill Danielsen's former position.

During the meeting, council members also agreed to form two subcommittees to address the township's housing and fair-share plan. Council and Planning Board members must resolve their dispute over a plan component — a proposed Jack Morris development — by Feb. 11, according to the Council on Affordable Housing.

If the issue is not resolved, the municipality could become vulnerable to development lawsuits, township officials said.

Danielsen and Orsini both voted in December to remove the Morris development, designed to include more than 800 homes and a Home Depot between Bennetts Lane and Veronica Avenue, from the township's plan. Council members later reinstated a modified Morris development. Danielsen said he was not at Tuesday's council meeting because he was "too disgusted to attend." "I anticipated this," said Danielsen about council's decision not to reappoint him, "but I was disappointed. The right thing to do would have been to put me back on."

Last month, Danielsen accused Councilwoman Ellen Ritchie, who is also a Planning Board member, of engaging in politically motivated dealings with the developer to push the project through. Ritchie has admitted to speaking with Morris but said the meeting was solely to discuss lowering the density of the proposal.

Some council members cited Danielsen's attendance record as reason not to reappoint him. Out of 29 Planning Board meetings through Nov. 30, Danielsen missed 14.

"Definitely attendance issues were a factor," Ritchie said. "There were also a lot of people who were interested in serving on the board. We had a lot of very good candidates to choose from, and we evaluated them all."

Added council member Brian Regan: "It was decided that we needed someone with experience who could contribute a fresh perspective. We wanted to continue with Mike because of his technical expertise. We hope to find another place for Joe within the party."

But Danielsen said he thought the decision was mostly personal.

"They were upset with the way I voted and the fact that I hung the party's dirty laundry out for the public eye," he said.

Danielsen said he will continue to attend Planning Board meetings at least until the COAH issue has been resolved and will step up his involvement in the Democratic Party.

"I plan to be 10 times more active in the party than I've ever been," he said.

Orsini said he is pleased with his reappointment but feels the township is losing a valuable board member.

"I'm looking forward to resuming the work I was doing and hope to be part of the solution with the COAH plan," Orsini said. "But I'll miss Joe as a colleague. He brought a lot of honesty and insight to the committee."

Orsini, who last month said Ritchie told him his political career would be over if he failed to vote for the Morris plan, said he hoped that going forward they can work together as professionals.

"I think some things were said in the heat of battle that were regrettable," Orsini said, "but I'm willing to work with Ellen as a colleague on the Planning Board. What she said to me on the dais is not an issue as far as I'm concerned any longer."

In a recent e-mail to township officials, Ritchie admitted for the first time to making the comment and acknowledged she was under investigation by Somerset County Prosecutor Wayne Forrest. Forrest said the prosecutor's policy is neither to confirm or deny an ongoing investigation.

Township Manager Kenneth Daly, who said he authorized Ritchie to speak with Morris, called the investigation "just politics" and said allegations were politically motivated. A date for a meeting between the council and Planning Board subcommittees, each made up of three members, has yet to be set, Daly said. Teresa Danile, William Sumter and Levine were chosen to represent the council. Danile and Sumter supported reinserting the Morris development, while Levine opposed it.

Planning Board subcommittee members had not been announced by press time yesterday. Orsini said he hoped to fill one of the slots himself.

"I'd like to be part of the solution," Orsini said. "The only way I feel it will work though is if everyone negotiates with good faith with all the cards on the table."