

Zoning perceptions

Some residents think developers have unfair advantages in getting property rezoned, but officials say that's untrue

Super Big Developers, Inc.



Illustrations by JIM DOMBROWS

■ Knowing the master plan designation and doing your homework are keys to success, officials say.

By **SCOTT NEINAS**
Bedford Now

Is it easier for builders and developers to get land rezoned in Bedford Township?

Township officials say no. Planning experts, however, have an answer as to why that perception may exist.

Builders and developers usually know a township's zoning map like the backs of their hands. They're more familiar with township requirements and tendencies because they pay attention. Knowing the zoning guidelines is vital to what they do for a living.

"I wouldn't consider it an unfair advantage," said Ben Tallerico, head planner for the City of Monroe. "It's up to the resident to perform due diligence to find out the information and get a head start on the process." Still, he said, the perception exists, and not just in Bedford. Tallerico has worked as a planner in Toledo, Detroit and now Monroe.

"I think the perception, and I'm not saying it's a fact, is that if you have a lot of money and you're a

big-time developer, you have a lot of connections, that the system is faster. It's not true here (in Monroe), but I see where the perception comes from."

Take Mike and Marsha Vandercook. All they wanted to do was build a couple more homes on their property, which is zoned non-conforming agricultural. The couple have almost four acres of land at Jackman and Temperance Rds. When Mrs. Vandercook looks out her front window, she can see new homes being built. In almost every direction, in fact, she sees houses.

The Vandercooks asked the township almost two years ago for permission to rezone their land so they could build more houses on it, but no decision has been made.

The wait has been frustrating, they said, particularly when they've seen other properties near them rezoned to allow for large residential developments.

Arvind Shah, an outgoing planning commissioner for Bedford Township, said property owners have to do their homework to see what can be done with their properties. It's the township's job, he said, to provide as much information to residents as possible. Builders and developers, he said, are

Zoning (cont.)

better prepared and have more documentation to justify their requests, typically.

“But that information is available to anyone. Anyone can ask what the minimum requirements are, it’s not a secret,” Shah said.

A review of township records shows that the township denies just as many commercial projects as it does residential ones. So even if a developer knows all the tricks of the trade, it doesn’t guarantee an approval from planning bodies.

“Developers are no more successful than anyone else,” said township Clerk Bob Schockman.

Planners look at the requirements of the zoning, surrounding land uses, the intensity of the use and the township’s future land use maps to make decisions on rezoning requests.

“The biggest stumbling block we run into is a request not being consistent with the master plan,” said Dennis Jenkins, the township’s planning direc-

tor. The master plan is a future land use map that has properties designated for certain uses, whether they be residential, commercial or industrial.

Still, a map is one thing, what’s visible to the eye is another.

“Everything around me is residential, it just makes sense that it be rezoned residential, but the planners recommended against it,” Mrs. Vandercook said. “I don’t understand why it’s taken us 20 months to get an answer when it’s apparent that it doesn’t take builders and developers that long. I see everything around me being built up.”

The struggle illustrates the perception that it’s harder for residents to get approvals by the township. Township officials, however, say their hands are tied when a master plan designates a parcel a certain way. If the township takes action inconsistent to the master plan, it could set a precedent for other master plan designations to be overturned, rendering the planning document useless.

Tallerico said the best way a citizen can have a say in how a property is zoned is to attend public hearings on master plan changes, although the master plan is usually updated only every 10 years.

“Once the master plan is adopted, the planning commission doesn’t really have a lot to do with deciding the future land use,” Tallerico said.

The tension between property owner and government is partly cultural. Property rights were a large part of the freedom this country was built on.

“In America, it’s been ‘go west, young man,’ people have the perception that it’s their land, they can do what they want with it,” Tallerico said. But community planning over the years has placed more and more regulations on how people can use their property.

“You have to have a comprehensive look at planning for the growth of a region that’s good for everybody,” Tallerico said.

