

The Power of Public Participation on Land Use Decisions

Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association

If you have concerns about development issues in your community get involved! Depending on the issue, your concerns may be addressed through a few phone calls. However, for more complex projects, your participation may be more lengthy and valuable. Here are six (6) major points to help your efforts.

- 1. Learn the status of the Project** – Contact the municipal clerk's office or planning department to understand the review process and important deadlines for hearings and comments. Learn about the statute of the *Preliminary Site Plan or Subdivision Review*. Ask about the role of the Township, County and State in the necessary review and decisions on pertinent site plans and permits. Do not miss these opportunities to get involved.
- 2. Ask Questions**—Informally discuss the project plans with municipal Environmental Commission or members of the governing body to understand their position on the project, to understand the review process and to express your initial concerns. Specific environmental concerns and zoning concerns will give more weight to your arguments. Here are some initial questions to consider:
 - How is the property zoned? What is the minimum lot size? Is clustering allowed? What is the impervious cover limit? Limitation on tree cutting?
 - Will the development be served with public sewer and/or water? Or will on-site septic systems and individual wells be used? If septic systems are used, check Board of Health requirements.
 - Is the site in an area designated by the town as a conservation area or one targeted for open space or farmland?
- 3. Identify Partners** – The support from neighbors, your town's Environmental Commission, or other local groups will be beneficial to affect decisions. These allies can quickly help you become more familiar with the planning process and how best to proceed to articulate your concerns and recommendations.
 - Call your neighbors and friends – learn who may share your concerns and may be planning to get involved or attend upcoming meetings.
 - Organize a social evening at your home to discuss everyone's concerns.
 - Maintain positive rapport with your township officials—including the mayor, environmental commission members, shade tree commission members, the township planner and historic preservation commission members, if applicable. Their contact information is available from the township clerk. Let them know your specific concerns about the project.
 - Ask how you can help them by providing specific information about the site, environmental constraints, waterways, etc. Ask if you can count on their support.
 - Ask if they have any information from the NJDEP or other state agencies. You can also obtain lots of information on the NJDEP website.
- 4. Summarize the Information** –Develop a synopsis of the project and your concerns early in the process. Explore the positive and negative effects of the project on your neighborhood, town and region – environment and community.

Merely being “against development” will not assist your cause. If your neighbors join you, many voices speaking together will have more influence on decisions than those from one individual. In addition, review comments from township officials, such as the Environmental Commission, Planning Board review committee, and others that are available.

5. **Publicize Your Concerns** – There are many ways to publicize your concerns, including written comment letters to Officials, Letters to the Editor of your local paper, testimony, petitions, flyers and websites. By publicizing your concerns you may gain more supporters, not only from your neighbors but also from the town officials.
6. **Attend and Participate at Public Hearings** – Speaking up, or testifying at meetings and public hearings may seem overwhelming, especially when discussions are heated. Though you may feel intimidated, you should speak up for your concerns. You are an important representative of the community and always have the right to communicate your position. But be ready for some long nights!
7. **Be familiar with the Hearing Process** –
 - The public may need to register to speak at a hearing. Be sure that your name gets on this list. You can decline to speak later if others have addressed your concerns.
 - The developer and his experts present the project first, followed by specific details, including site features, environmental concerns, building layout, parking details, and impacts to the environment. Depending on the magnitude of the project, this testimony may occur over several nights.
 - The Planning Board and its professionals have an opportunity to cross-examine, or question, the experts. All those who provide testimony, including the public, professionals, experts and the developer must testify under oath or be subject to perjury.
 - After Board questioning, the public has the right to question and testify.
8. **Be an Effective Speaker**
 - Introduce yourself to the board with your name, address and location to the development. You need not be located near the development to testify about your concerns and issues. Impacts to public health and safety and to the environment are important and valid concerns.
 - Stay calm when speaking. Focus on the issues, not politics or personalities. It is important to be clear and concise in presenting your findings, and it demonstrates that you value their time.
 - Always thank the board for their time and attention.
 - Be a good listener. This is just as important as being a good speaker. It is important to hear all sides of the discussion and understand the opinions and messages of others, so that you can form your own response.