

Neighbors protest subdivision farming

Written by Mark Jaeger

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Village tells developer to stop until officials can review land-use conflict

Residential lots in the Stoney Creek Meadow subdivision on Fredonia's south side haven't been selling as fast as developer Phil Lundman would like, so he came up with what he thought was an inspired solution.

Lundman wants to temporarily convert three vacant lots to farmland.

Existing homeowners in the development told village officials they have another word to describe the plan — insane.

Neighbors showed up in force at the last Village Board meeting, protesting Lundman's plan to allow a local farmer to grow alfalfa on several open lots. Only three homes have been built in the subdivision.

Stoney Creek Lane resident Pat Geraghty said he could not believe his ears when he learned about the intended agricultural use.

Geraghty said pesticide has already been applied to the lots to prepare the soil for crop production, posing a health hazard to those who live in the subdivision.

"Can you imagine crops growing on both side of my home? How is this going to affect taxes and my property value? My concern is that this will open every empty lot to farming," he said.

Kim Bartolotta, a resident of the subdivision and a real-estate broker, said farming is clearly an incompatible use in a residential area.

"We bought into this development as a residential subdivision with covenants, then the market took a dive. That is not his fault or my fault," Bartolotta said.

"Farming is very much appreciated, but not in a subdivision. It is hard to comprehend that the village would allow farming in a subdivision."

Bartolotta said allowing the cropland hurts the marketability of the project.

"I can't market the lots, saying you can build your dream home in this alfalfa field," she said.

Village President Chuck Lapicola was equally surprised when he checked into the village's zoning code and learned that there is no reference to whether farming is allowed or prohibited in residential areas.

"I am concerned with the health and safety of the people of the Village of Fredonia," Lapicola told residents. "At the very least, he needs to put up signs telling people pesticides have been sprayed."

He said he was told the lots total about 27 acres, but only about six of those acres are tillable.

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Lapicola said he asked Lundman to explain his plans for the vacant lots, drawing a lengthy e-mail response from the developer.

Lundman said he talked to a local farmer about growing alfalfa on the vacant lots using no-till cultivation. He said the first year of the on-site farming may require growing beans to condition the soil, again using no-till techniques.

“This seems to us to be preferable to growing dandelions and it makes no sense to us for environmental and economic reasons to keep the entire area mowed like a lawn,” Lundman wrote.

Lundman said he got the idea when visiting New Haven, Conn., and noticed that empty residential lots have been converted to large gardens.

Lundman said many other developers have chosen to default on their loans, leaving banks with unfulfilled promises of development.

“We decided early on not to dump the property on the bank as did so many other developers and do not know how long it will be before lots sell for a price related to the development cost,” he wrote.

Lundman predicted it will be “several years” before the real-estate market bounces back and sales rebound.

“We have no pressing need to sell the entire development, but need to keep the maintenance cost down as we keep them in nice, saleable condition,” he said.

Lundman said We Energies has already insisted he pay for the installation of utilities to the project now, rather than waiting for the market to turn.

Troubled that the question of farming in subdivisions has not yet been addressed, trustees told Lapicola — by a 4-2 vote — to issue a cease and desist order to Lundman until the matter can be resolved.

The Plan Commission is schedule to take up the issue at its June 6 meeting.