

Abutters, public weigh in on Fox Hill proposal

By Sarah E. Reynolds | Aug 02, 2013

CAMDEN — Proponents and opponents of a proposed zoning change that would allow an upscale substance abuse treatment facility with 12 beds at 235 Bay View St., known as Fox Hill, weighed in at a meeting of the Planning Board Thursday, Aug. 1.

The meeting was chaired by Planning Board Vice Chairman Lowrie Sargent, who explained Chairman Chris MacLean recused himself from matters having to do with Fox Hill because of a potential conflict of interest.

Sargent made clear at the outset there is not time to get the proposed zoning change on the November ballot. That leaves Fox Hill Real Estate — the new owners of the property — with the option of having it on the June 2014 ballot, or asking the select board to call a special town meeting.

Representing Fox Hill Real Estate LLC (FHRE) were H. Thompson “Tom” Rodman, one of the principal investors, and attorney Paul Gibbons. Also taking part in the presentation on behalf of Fox Hill was Dr. Philip Levendusky, senior vice president for business development and marketing at McLean Hospital, the largest psychiatric affiliate of Harvard University. McLean would be the sole tenant of Fox Hill and would operate the treatment program there.

Rodman stressed both the open space and the buildings, including the 16,000-square-foot main house, will be preserved, and work done on the property would be of high quality. “It’s being done right,” he said.

Rodman asserted the facility would affect neighbors less than had been the case under the previous owner, when the property was used for corporate events and parties.

He added Fox Hill will likely create “23 to 27 high-caliber jobs” for professional and other staff.

Levendusky said McLean would be responsible to get licensed by the state to run a medical facility of the type proposed. He described the hospital’s history in the field of addiction treatment, particularly where patients have more than one addiction or have additional psychiatric problems.

He cited McLean’s Fernside facility in the rural town of Princeton, Mass., as the model for Fox Hill. Like Fernside, he said, Fox Hill would accept only self-paid patients, who would be screened for appropriateness and ability to benefit from treatment. None of them will have a history of drug-dealing; all will be “100 percent volunteer,” he said. Patients will 85 to 90 percent from outside Maine, and will stay at the facility for around 30 days, at a cost of \$50,000 to \$60,000. Patients will range in age from 30 to 70, he said, with about equal numbers of men and women.

While there was some skepticism from the community before Fernside opened eight or nine years ago, Levendusky said, “Since we have opened that program, we are considered an A-plus-plus neighbor.”

He said the Camden facility would seek to do business with local enterprises, for example, by contracting with area restaurants to provide meals.

Gibbons spoke about the proposed zoning change, saying Fox Hill wanted to ensure the impact of the change would be “very minimal.” He added historically there had been some “light commercial” activity in the area, such as might be generated by the proposed treatment facility. The main house, he said was “practically turnkey for a residential alcohol facility,” requiring little modification, adding that the facility wouldn’t increase the traffic on Bay View Street.

“This was not a scheme to get rich quick,” Gibbons said. “We wanted something that would last for a long, long time.”

Noting that the house is too large to be sold as a single-family dwelling, he said, “We offer the best solution for that neighborhood.”

Gibbons said the proposed ordinance would require approval from the Planning Board to add or remove any of the buildings on the property, and for any change of tenant or operator of the facility.

Since the ordinance requires 10 acres of land for an alcohol treatment facility, only three properties in the zone would qualify, he said.

In response to questions from the board, the Fox Hill group revealed that McLean's initial lease would be for 10 years, with two 10-year renewals; if the property is sold, the planning board would still have to approve any change of tenant or operator; of the projected 23 to 27 employees, there would be about 20 full-time-equivalent employees; 95 percent of the employees would be new hires, and the medical director, clinical director and therapists will be full-time employees; lunch and dinner would be brought in and served by local restaurants, with a possibility that breakfast might be handled the same way, or prepared on-site.

In addition, while patients will not necessarily be accompanied by a staff member at all times, they will be closely monitored on the grounds, and will be transported and accompanied by staff when they leave the grounds. There is some space that could be used to accommodate visiting family members, but it is expected they would instead generally stay in town.

Six members of the public also addressed the board, with one opposing and five in support of the proposal.

Opposing the proposal was Matthew Manahan of the Portland law firm of Pierce Atwood, who represents abutters Leonard and Madlyn Abramson of 230 and 221 Bay View St. Manahan sent a letter to the board laying out his clients' objections to the proposed zoning change as well as the proposed facility at Fox Hill. Restating the objections expressed in the letter, Manahan said his clients have "serious reservations" about the proposal, adding that the ordinance as written is very broad and could adversely affect the Coastal-Residential zone.

Manahan went on to say the light commercial use proposed by Fox Hill is not consistent with the town's comprehensive plan. He added McLean's Fernside facility has no neighbors, and other such facilities run by the hospital are not in locales similar to Fox Hill, with near neighbors and on narrow roads.

Manahan also said his clients are concerned about additional traffic and the number of employees at the proposed treatment facility, as well as the potential for incursions by "overly aggressive news media" seeking sensational stories about high-profile patients. The Abramsons, he said, believe the proposal is "not appropriate in the Bay View neighborhood."

Finally, Manahan raised the possibility that if the town allows the Fox Hill zoning change, it may not be able to refuse a future proposal for a methadone clinic, or a treatment facility for court-mandated patients.

Two of the speakers in support of the proposal said they work in the field of addiction medicine. Paul Kimberlyn, a licensed professional clinical counselor, said residential alcohol treatment programs are hard to find and "the need is so great." He also expressed concern about the "not in my backyard" attitude voiced by Manahan on behalf of his clients.

Dr. Harold Amsel said he works at "various hospitals around here," and has specialized in the treatment of addiction for more than 30 years. He said in his experience 30-day residential treatment for alcohol treatment was very effective, adding, "I'm stunned at the amount of alcoholism and addiction we have here." And because "there isn't a good fee-for-service program" in Maine, he has had to send patients to Florida and Arizona for treatment, he said.

He added, "We have the opportunity to have the best program in the country."

Reminded by Planning Board member Richard Householder that treatment at Fox Hill would cost \$50,000 to \$60,000 and most patients were expected to come from outside Maine, Amsel said there was a possibility of some scholarships for local people, and that in any case, the presence of the facility would create a "nucleus of recovery" in the area, spawning 12-step groups and other programs. "Recovery spreads," Amsel said.

Amsel also presented to the board a letter in support of the proposal from his colleague, Dr. Frederick Goggins, a Fox Hill abutter living at 201 Bay View St. The letter said, in part, "...I believe that the entire community of Camden could benefit from this affiliation with McLean and Harvard Medical School. All members of the local medical community with whom I have spoken view this project as a very unique and potentially quite fruitful association. ...I feel that the operations of this facility will have a very low impact on my neighborhood and will not alter the character or tranquility of the environment ..."

Other speakers included real estate agent Joe Cooper, who said he thought the proposed facility was "a wonderful idea," that would enhance Camden's reputation and draw talent to the area.

In response to Manahan's remarks, he said light commercial uses permitted in the C-R zone, such as nursery schools and daycare facilities, would have an "employment base" similar to Fox Hill's, adding that because of its long driveway, the property is "very private," and would pose little disruption to the neighborhood. He went on to say he thought it would be financially prohibitive to establish a methadone clinic or other facility that relied on insurance payments at Fox Hill.

Michael Thompson is the groundskeeper at Fox Hill, where he has been employed for the last three years, working for the Simmons family. He said he is pleased with the “high-quality workmanship” of the renovations Rodman is doing there, adding Fox Hill will be “an architecturally significant property again.”

Educator Carol Coyle said she supports the project, because she hopes McLean would bring awareness of drug and alcohol problems affecting youth and hopes the hospital would partner with student counselors, as well as helping to educate parents. “I’m very much for this project,” she said.

In response to Coyle’s remarks, Levendusky said McLean offers professional education in a number of areas and also has a speaker’s bureau. He said the hospital would be interested in partnering with local resources to help with local problems.

After discussion, the board asked Gibbons to present revised language for the ordinance, including guidelines for how a new operator should be chosen, at the Aug. 15 meeting, with no public comment at that time. Then, Aug. 29, further public input will be accepted.