

Fox Hill rehabilitation facility proposal returns to planning board

By Stephanie Grinnell | Jul 26, 2013

CAMDEN — Several months after an initial proposal for a high-end residential treatment facility at Fox Hill in Camden, the attorney representing the new owners appeared before the planning board July 25 to pick up the process where it left off.

Attorney Paul Gibbons represents Fox Hill Real Estate LLC, which purchased the property earlier this year. According to Knox County Registry of Deeds, the transfer was recorded between May 31 and June 5 from Fox Hill Investments LLC to FHRE LLC. According to previously published reports, Ellen Simmons was the owner of the 235 Bay View St. property, which is located in the Coastal Residential District.

Simmons and H. Thompson Rodman failed to reach an agreement for purchase of the property in March after months of negotiations. Associated with Fox Hill Real Estate LLC are Rodman and Merrill Halpern, as listed on a press release. During an interview in March, Rodman pointed to his personal reasons — a father who struggled with alcohol and addiction to pills — as his motivation to establish a rehabilitation facility at Fox Hill.

On July 25, Gibbons presented new wording for the potential zoning change and cited Fox Hill Real Estate's ownership of the property as the basis for standing. McLean Hospital will enter into a long-term sole tenancy lease at Fox Hill with approval of the zoning change.

Dr. Phillip Levendusky told the planning board the facility will be a 12-bed residential program housing patients for 30 to 60 days. The program will treat those struggling with alcohol and substance abuse issues as well as mental health difficulties, he said.

"People voluntarily coming to seek care" are the target patients, Levendusky said, adding the facility will not accept insurance and state referrals. "This is a self-pay kind of program."

According to previously published reports, patients will pay between \$50,000 and \$60,000 per month, living at Fox Hill during treatment. Levendusky said the facility is expected to appeal to a national patient base. A similar program in Princeton, Mass., has flourished, he said, and has not generated any negative reaction in the community.

"Fox Hill Real Estate LLC is a real estate company that is putting forth the amendment. It is a tax-paying entity, formed with the single purpose of acquiring the Fox Hill property, and then, entering into a long-term lease with McLean Hospital, which will operate an alcohol rehab facility," a press release from the organization states.

"We've done a lot of work to get to this stage," Halpern said in the release. "We look forward to continuing to collaborate with the planning board, Zoning Board of Appeals and our neighbors in Camden as this process moves forward. Likewise McLean will work closely with local and state regulatory agencies to obtain the necessary licenses and approvals to operate its program."

McLean Hospital is the largest psychiatric affiliate of Harvard Medical School.

Gibbons said he hoped to have the issue presented to voters on the November ballot. However, Planning Board Chairman Lowrie Sargent said the time frame will not allow that to happen.

"I'd say that's impossible," Sargent said, adding two public hearings are required as well as an informational meeting with the planning board. "It's too late to do that within this time frame."

He noted an Aug. 20 deadline for items to be included on the November ballot and suggested Gibbons approach the select board about a special town meeting rather than putting the issue on the June 2014 ballot. Gibbons said he has been in contact with town officials and thought there was still enough time to put the question to voters in November.

"It's not possible to have this on the November ballot," Sargent said, adding he also had some concerns about the public perception of the issue being rushed. "Last time, the planning board was criticized for trying to rush this through."

He noted agreeing to a meeting Thursday, Aug. 1, already is "giving you a break" because most items require two-week notice before the planning board will address them. According to Code Enforcement Officer Steve Wilson, the planning board will hear a presentation of the proposal Aug. 1.

“Public input will be at the discretion of the board as this is not an official public hearing, however the public is urged to attend,” he said in an email.

The meeting will be streamed live online at townhallstreams.com/locations/camden-me and shown on the public access channel, Wilson said.

Sargent noted the planning board refers potential zoning changes to the select board in an advisory capacity.

During prior planning board meetings, Gibbons cited Fox Hill as an ideal location for the rehabilitation facility. The 13.8 acre property valued at nearly \$6.5 million, according to town tax records, boasts three guest cottages, private offices, garages, a salon, an exercise center, a swimming pool and a “Game Cottage” that houses a four-lane bowling alley, arcade, diner and exhibit space, according to previously published reports.

Earlier concerns about use of the property were centered on the types of medications prescribed for patients as well as potential future uses of the property.