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DECEMBER 16, 2011

‘Take us to court,’ says Stepping Stones

By **MARTIN WILBUR**

Stepping Stones representatives and the Bedford Planning Board grappled Tuesday night over conditions of a proposed protocol intended to provide clear guidelines regarding the frequency and volume of visitors to the site that protects nearby residents from intrusion.

Much of the hourlong discussion, spiked with criticisms from neighbors of the former home of Alcoholics Anonymous founder Bill Wilson, focused primarily on appropriate limits for the number of visitors and hours of operation at the Oak Road property. The matter is before the planning board as it continues to weigh a recommendation to the town board on Stepping Stones' request for a special use permit for a new parking area on the eight-acre parcel.

‘If Ms. Briganti is willing to litigate it, then we’ll litigate it.’

— *Stepping Stones attorney
Whitney Singleton*

Stepping Stones attorney Whitney Singleton and executive director Annah Perch told planning board members that the nonprofit organization hosts most of its visitors during a three-hour window, mainly between noon and 3 p.m., six days a week when the welcome center is open. A daily tour begins at 1 p.m. Appointments are also made in advance by groups requesting times before or after those hours.

“It’s a very limited period of time when visitors are allowed to come,” Mr. Singleton said.

However, several neighbors argued that they have had to endure several years of growing crowds flocking to the area, which has

created noise and traffic on the surrounding narrow streets and degraded their quality of life, particularly on weekends during warm weather months. Oak Road resident Diane Briganti said the number of visitors has increased to “crazy numbers.”

“It has really been since Annah has taken over in the last five years that this has gone out of control,” Ms. Briganti said.

Ms. Briganti said she was also irked that Stepping Stones has been allowed to operate as a museum in possible violation of the town code, which has played a key role in increasing the number of visitors.

In response, Mr. Singleton said the Stepping Stones use is legal because it’s a pre-existing, nonconforming use, but said the neighbors are free to take his client to court. “If Ms. Briganti is willing to litigate it, then we’ll litigate it,” he said.

Planning board member Deirdre Courtney-Batson said adherence to the town code is not in the planning board’s purview, but because of concern over potential disruptions to the neighborhood there need to be clear parameters established to help guide the applicant and to inform neighbors what they can expect.

“What we really want to do here is to look at this document and say this is what is allowed, this is what’s not allowed,” Ms. Courtney-Batson said of the protocol that is being drafted.





Mr. Singleton said that records of guests and vehicles kept by Stepping Stones don’t support the residents’ claims of overwhelming crowds. In 2011, there have been about 2,700 visitors in 630 vehicles, a similar level of activity that is generated by a typical house over the course of a year, Mr. Singleton said, although he acknowledged most of Stepping Stones’ visits were compressed from late spring to early fall. Other than the annual June picnic, which drew a crowd of about 450, the next busiest day was Sept. 17, which attracted 165 visitors. On Sept. 10, there were more than 90 visitors.

Mr. Singleton also noted that for about one-third of the year there are no visitors to the site.

The last time Stepping Stones appeared before the board, in September, it agreed to change the request for a limit of six events a year where crowds may exceed 100 people to a maximum of 12 events of more than 75 people. That number does not include the picnic.

Even with those limitations, neighbors remained leery of significant turnouts that fall just short of the 75-person threshold, which could negatively impact the area. There could also be 12 days a year where the gatherings could have hundreds.

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"I am very, very apprehensive of creating a document that allows this to continue to grow," said Oak Road resident Leslie Timme.

As a result, the applicant agreed to cap the number of daily visitors to 200 except for the annual picnic. The board also pressed for precise times for closing and opening. In Mr. Singleton's draft of the protocol, he requested that public access to the site be granted from sunrise to sunset to help accommodate local residents who are permitted to use the property for activities such as sledding and dog walking.

But Ms. Courtney-Batson said in the summer that would mean as early as 6 a.m. and appealed to Stepping Stones that the grounds be open to visitors from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

An issue that needed clarification was to describe the types of vehicles, especially vans and buses, that would have access to the grounds. While Mr. Singleton reiterated from previous appearances that there would be no coach buses allowed to enter, minibuses and vans would be used to shuttle visitors between the site and either the Town House or the Bedford train station on the busiest days, he said.

The proposed new parking area that has triggered the discussion will have spaces for 11 vehicles. There is also an area for overflow parking on certain days.

The applicant will return to a future meeting with a revised protocol to reflect the changes agreed to on Tuesday night.

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