Rallying Against High Density Development in the Heart of Worcester

In May, the Worcester Board of Supervisors denied a Conditional Use Application (CUA) by the Cutler Group to turn the Center Square Golf Club property into a residential life-care facility. This action by the Board came after months of hearings, testimony and a well-executed effort by neighbors of the golf course to not allow this beautiful tract of land to fall victim to high-density housing under the guise of a residential life-care facility. So, how did this particular group of neighbors come together and get organized to launch a campaign to fight one of the most powerful developers in the Philadelphia area? Let’s take a look.

In August 2014, the Cutler Group submitted a Conditional Use Application to build a residential life-care facility on the grounds of the Center Square Golf Club. Worcester Township sent letters informing neighbors living close to the golf course of the pending CUA hearings. One neighbor, Stuart Land, who resides on Berks Road, traveled from house to house surrounding the golf course, knocking on doors and leaving flyers alerting neighbors to attend the pending CUA hearings. During his ride around the neighborhood, he stopped to speak to Jim Phelan, who was out mowing his lawn on Whitehall Road.

A Trek Through The Woods

Have you ever wondered about the number of walking trails we have in Worcester Township? Have you ever thought about where they are, how long they are, or even if they are connected in some way?

Did you know that there is not a single map that shows all of the trails with their associated distances, connecting points and surface details?

This fall and winter, the Friends of Worcester will be undertaking a project to map out all of the connected trails in Worcester Township. This includes walking, horseback riding, hiking and biking trails. The goal is to produce a map that can be used by anyone who would like to trek through part or all of the trails available to the public within our township.

We already know that there are formal trail sections that have been built by the township, like the beautiful Zacharias Creek Trail. There are also small footpaths, equestrian trails and even single-track bike pathways. Perhaps you know of some additional trail sections that traverse our township.

Once we have an overall rendering of the trails, we can produce a useful map with distance annotations, a legend showing trail surfaces, parking areas, and maybe even a web-based interactive version with links to photos and videos.

The map could be utilized by walkers, runners, bicyclists and horseback riders. Think about being able to map out a 10K run for yourself, or having a useful tool for parents or teachers to educate kids about all the natural wonders our township trails have to offer.

If you know about some of the trails in the township and would like to help, please contact Jim Phelan at jimphelan55@gmail.com.
This serendipitous meeting was the beginning of the group that later became known as Worcester Alliance for Responsible Growth (WARG). This group also reached out to the Friends of Worcester in September 2014, as both groups were opposed to the proposed high-density development on this property. The Friends of Worcester and WARG are still opposed to this conditional use application.

During the initial stages of this process, there was not much information available from the Cutler Group — only a drawing showing a proposed development with 334 townhouses and detached homes, plus an assisted living facility with 141 units. At a meeting of the Worcester Planning Commission on September 8, 2014, a number of neighbors turned out to express opposition to the proposed use. Initially the Planning Commission did not have enough information to take any action. However, later in September, they denied the application because many requirements were not met in several areas: the high population density did not meet the intent of the Agricultural District zoning, the proposal failed to meet the definition of a nursing home facility, and the proposed development did not fit the goals of the current Montgomery County Comprehensive Plan or the Worcester Township Comprehensive Plan.

At the October 15th Board of Supervisors’ meeting, Mr. James Garrity, the Township's Solicitor, reviewed the procedures and protocols for a CUA hearing. At that meeting, neighbors were able to register as “Parties” to the proceedings, which gave them the opportunity to cross-examine or question any of the Cutler Group’s expert witnesses. After this first hearing, it became very clear that the neighbors needed to organize and present a concerted opposition to the plans because the proposed development as described in the CUA application looked more like an age-restricted, high-density residential community than a residential life-care facility.

The first organizational meeting of neighbors took place at the home of Debbie and Jim Phelan on October 29, 2014. At that meeting, 24 neighbors came together to discuss concerns over the proposed Cutler project and to generate issues and questions that could be presented at the upcoming Conditional Use Application hearings. It was obvious to the neighbors that they had to articulate the evidence clearly, because the project, as presented, would be detrimental to neighbors and to the township.

Over the next month, the activity associated with the CUA hearings began to accelerate. At the first township hearing, Richard McBride, the attorney representing the Cutler Group, began to lay out some of the planning associated with the proposed development. Details were very sketchy, but it became clear that the information reflected very little of what one might consider to be necessary for a true residential life-care facility.

On November 17, 2014, Jim Phelan and Stuart Land organized the first open meeting of concerned citizens. At that meeting, the group discussed core issues and concerns, how to grow membership of the organization, the selection of a name for the citizens group, the formation of an executive committee, and the need for funding yard signs and postage. As a result, over 50 families living close to the golf course formed WARG – the Worcester Alliance for Responsible Growth.

As the hearings progressed, it became increasingly evident that WARG needed more structure and support in presenting opposition at the CUA hearings. The group hired an attorney, David Shafkowitz, who has a law practice in Chalfont and is very experienced in the areas of municipal and zoning law. Jim and Stuart also asked for support from the Friends of Worcester. FOW's Board agreed to help by offsetting the costs associated with printing and mailing postcards to all residents living in Worcester urging their attendance at Worcester Board of Supervisors’ hearings.

In early March 2015, Mr. McBride, attorney for the developer, rested his case after calling three expert witnesses to support the plan for their “quasi” residential life-care community. WARG’s attorney, David Shafkowitz, presented the neighbors’ case with the assistance of two expert witnesses and several neighbors, who provided testimony at the next Board of Supervisors' meeting held in early April 2015.

One witness, Kathleen Stewart, an expert in the area of health administration with a specialty in life-care facilities, focused her testimony on the zoning definition of a residential life-care facility from a management and healthcare perspective. The other expert witness, George Bryant, an architect with a background in land planning, zoning and design with a particular emphasis on health and life-care communities, testified that the design did not reflect a true life-care community. Three Worcester residents provided a local perspective on the proposed
Variety Club — A “Growing” Camp

I’ve passed the Variety Club sign on Valley Forge Road for years, but I really didn’t know what they do. You might be asking that question too and wondering how they contribute to our Worcester community.

The Variety Club property was donated in 1947 to the Philadelphia Variety Club and originally opened its doors in 1949 as a camp for boys with polio. Today Variety Club Camp and Developmental Center in Worcester is part of Philadelphia Variety, which serves children with disabilities from birth to 21 throughout the Delaware Valley and Philadelphia region. Chief Executive Officer Angus Murray has been with the Variety Club for almost 9 years. He has been helping children and adults with special needs since he was 15 years old. He is responsible for both the Worcester and the Philadelphia location.

In Worcester, the Variety Club property consists of 80 beautiful acres extending from Valley Forge Road along Potshop Road to Trooper Road. It includes the historic Daniel Spare manor house, built in the early 1800s. The long driveway on Potshop Road has a new produce stand this year with seasonal vegetables and flowers near the entrance. As you drive back further, you will come to the Variety Club Camp. There are 20 cabins and many additional buildings which provide numerous athletic programs such as basketball, baseball, soccer, kickball, golf, tennis, swimming and karate. There are also indoor facilities which house a café and bakery, full commercial kitchen and cafeteria, arts and crafts studio, sensory room and wood shop. Additional outdoor features include an amphitheater, fire pit and greenhouse.

Variety Club also organizes special events, such as trips to Sesame Place, Adventure Aquarium, golf outings, weekend retreats and a Holiday Bazaar – the next one is scheduled for November 21, 2015. These events and games help to round out the core intent of their work, which is to build independence and self-confidence in children and youth with physical and developmental disabilities. Variety Club offers educational, recreational and social enrichment activities and also connects families to helpful resources. During the school year, Variety Club has a program to fill a gap for special-needs children before and after school.

In the summer, camp is in full gear for Methacton School District children who need more extensive summer school programs, as well as children from surrounding school districts. Variety hires 150 staff to help with over 200 children. Four programs are offered: Day Camp, Overnight Camp, Extended School Year (ESY), and Vocational Training for ages 16 to 21. The eight week vocational program offers children an opportunity to work at the camp. The goal is to teach the children social interaction and life skills that will enable them to be contributing members of society.

The financial situation at the Variety Club is improving, but it still remains a challenge. There is a continuous need for maintenance and repairs on the buildings. One area in particular, the indoor pool and gym building, needs extensive repairs. The indoor pool was closed in 2009 when the roof started leaking. It will cost over one million dollars to fix the roof and make the necessary building improvements before the pool can be reopened. Before it was closed, the pool was a very popular amenity at the camp.

Although the organization’s revenue comes primarily from corporate sponsors, donations, leasing some of the facilities, and fees, there aren’t enough funds to make all of the desperately needed improvements. Without grants and the help of many volunteers, this camp would have failed. Looking to the future, they are working on a “Strategic Plan for Programs” which will highlight the future needs of the children and their families, in tandem with a Capital Campaign for building improvements.

Two years ago, Steve Rock, a very dedicated volunteer at Variety Club, began the Greenhouse Program. Greener Partners, whose Longview Farm is on Stump Hall Road in Worcester, provides the educational portion of the program. The greenhouse which was abandoned a few years earlier is now operational and in the process of being adapted for year round use. With Steve’s help and vision, not only has a new life skill for children begun, but a new source of revenue has been found for the camp. The greenhouse and outdoor garden follow organic growing principles by being pesticide-free. Here you will find all stages of the growing cycle as well as different growing techniques, such as an aquaponics gardening system that uses the water from several tilapia tanks for fertilization. Other techniques include container gardening, vertical (continued on page 5)
**Worcester’s History All Around Us**

We are fortunate as a community to have so many historic resources right here in our neighborhood. We have rustic barns, stone spring houses, root cellars, pig houses, smoke houses, pioneer houses, ice houses and tile silos. We can see farm ponds and flowing creeks from our winding, country roads. Historic trees like the Methacton Oak, churches and cemeteries that pre-date the Revolutionary War, seven 19th century one-room school houses, and two historic community centers -- Farmers’ Union Hall and Fairview Assembly Hall (now called Community Hall) -- bring even more historic relevance to our community.

Intertwined with these buildings are the stories that make Worcester unique -- the Underground Railroad connection at the Dutchie and Bethel Hill Churches, and the Huber Quarry on Whitehall Road, which yielded a prehistoric fossil in 1942. We can see examples of 18th century farming life at Peter Wentz Farmstead, a working sawmill on Quarry Hall Road, and a Nike missile site from the Cold War era. Even something as simple as a lilac bush dating from the 19th century, which continues to bloom every spring, reminds us how strong our heritage remains. In case you’re wondering, the lilac bush is on Hollow Road, just south of Skippack Pike, where it once marked the corner of the Jacob Wentz Inn property.

Today, Worcester is a very desirable community, in part because our historic landscape is more intact and visible than in many of our neighboring townships. It’s easy to be enchanted as we walk, bike, or drive past beautiful old homes and barns. But our historic resources are so much more than just aesthetics. Communities that have preserved their history are more economically successful – think of Phoenixville and West Chester. The areas around those once-deserted downtowns have prospered, due in part to the economic energy generated by their historic landscapes.

We now have the opportunity to document our historic structures, as many other townships have done. Heritage Conservancy, a non-profit land trust that works with communities to preserve their natural resources and historic heritage, approached the Worcester Historical Society to create an inventory of our historic buildings as part of a grant through the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission (PHMC) and the Army Corps of Engineers. This is a privately funded, non-government-affiliated project that will be conducted by volunteers trained by PHMC. Three communities are part of this grant project – Abington, Lower Frederick, and Worcester. The survey will be conducted only from the public right-of-way and will involved only exterior views of the structures.

Many other Montgomery County municipalities, including Limerick, Ambler, Upper Dublin, Springfield, East Norriton, Upper Moreland, and Horsham, have completed similar inventories to document their historic resources. Some communities have used their inventories to create a historic plaque program that allows residents to commemorate the significance of their property. Worcester’s inventory will be compiled at the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission and will be available to the public. It will allow us to show future generations part of what is so special about Worcester Township.

**Longview Farm and Market**

When did you last visit Longview Farm? The farm (formerly Willow Creek Orchards) continues to be a tremendous resource for Worcester residents looking for food produced using organic and sustainable farming practices. Fresh eggs, raw milk, local meat products and freshly harvested vegetables are all available. Stop in to visit with the store manager, Kim Boyd, and see what the market has to offer.

Longview Farm is part of Greener Partners, a regional farm-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to connect communities through food, farms and education. Currently, Longview Farm has a twofold operation in Worcester. The farm market, in partnership with Kimberton Whole Foods, sells produce grown mainly on site. Their goal for 2016 is to produce 100 percent of their produce on site. The farm’s Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program provides members with a steady supply of seasonal, organically grown produce.

Worcester residents are lucky to have access to this organic market, which is part of 102 acres of permanently preserved farmland. This productive farm, permanently preserved open space, organically grown food, and educational programs are all of great community value. What more can you ask for? Stop by, consider a CSA membership, and eat healthy!

For more information on CSA membership, summer programs, and events at the farm, go to [http://greenerpartners.org](http://greenerpartners.org) or visit the farm at 3215 Stump Hall Road, Collegeville, PA 19426.
development and its negative impact on neighbors and the greater Worcester community.

Finally, on April 1 (yes...April’s Fools Day), the CUA hearings ended. The parties were informed that the Board of Supervisors had 45 days to decide whether to approve or deny the application.

On May 20, 2015, the Board of Supervisors rendered their “Decision and Order” to deny the application because the applicant’s proposal had failed to satisfy the definition of a residential life-care facility as stated in Worcester Township's Zoning Ordinance. It was clear to many of those attending the hearings that WARG's attorney, expert witnesses, and citizen testimony had provided strong evidence that gave the Supervisors sufficient reason to deny the application. For example, the testimony showed that the proposed facility did not offer a guaranteed continuum of care as well as a continuum of accommodations for its residents, which is the hallmark of a residential life-care facility. Another blatant omission in the developer's plan was that the level of care did not include a skilled nursing unit.

During the first week of July 2015, the Cutler Group's attorney filed a Notice of Land Use Appeal with the Court of Common Pleas of Montgomery County, which meant that the matter was still very much in play.

Since that time, not much has happened. A judge has been assigned to the appeal and will review the testimony presented during the hearings and the legal briefs submitted by the parties’ attorneys, as well as the decision rendered by the Township Supervisors. After this review, the judge could either agree with or reverse the Supervisors' decision. The judge may also want all parties to get together to seek an acceptable compromise regarding what might happen on the Center Square Golf Course property. The entire process could take an additional 12 to 18 months. So the fight continues.

In order for WARG to have a voice in any decision that the Supervisors might make to accept a modified development proposal, WARG filed a “Petition to Intervene” with the Court. The WARG group now has legal representation and will have input on any plan that might be formally discussed between the developer and the Township officials.

The Friends of Worcester in conjunction with WARG are committed to keeping the community up to date with any future news in regards to this conditional use application, so look for our e-mail updates. As of mid September, everyone involved still awaits the decision of the Court.

__Once it’s gone, it’s gone forever!__

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In the greenhouse program, the children are learning the life skills of sustainable gardening. They plant seeds, watch them grow, tend those plants, harvest them, sell them at the farm stand and to partners, clean up beds, save seeds and rotate crops. They also have developed some key partnerships with the Keystone Lounge, a restaurant near Cedars, and the Philadelphia Zoo, where they are selling their produce and hope, in the future, to sell tilapia. The program’s potential for expansion is enormous because the camp already has the land. Variety is actively seeking additional business partnerships throughout the Delaware Valley to further leverage the distribution of their growing inventory of produce.

With all the Variety Club programs, helping children with special needs is the number one goal. The services provided at Variety Club fill a year-round need that is not always addressed at many of the surrounding school districts. The Variety Club hires many of their staff, volunteers and counselors from our community. They also offer a wide array of college internships, such as the Future Educators Program.

If you are interested in making a donation, volunteering, or leasing camp facilities, or if you would like additional information about the Variety Club, please contact Angus Murray at 610-584-4366 or visit their website at [http://varietyphila.org/club-camp/](http://varietyphila.org/club-camp/).
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FRIENDS OF WORCESTER is a non-profit organization made up of new and long-time residents of the Township. All involved residents share an appreciation for the rural quality of Worcester and a common concern for its future. FOW seeks to influence that future. All funds received are used to support our efforts to preserve open space, maintain the rural lifestyle of the community and keep our neighbors informed through our minutes and newsletters.

☐ Friend - $35 ☐ Family - $60 ☐ Benefactor - $100 ☐ Advocate - $250 ☐ Lifetime - $1,000 ☐ Other

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All residents, contributing or not, are always welcome at FOW monthly meetings. Check www.friendsofworcester.org for dates.

Please send your tax-deductible contributions to:
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P.O. Box 545
Worcester, PA 19490
(or use the PayPal donation button on our website)

The official registration and financial information of The Friends of Worcester may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-332-0988. Registration does not imply endorsement.
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Join us for an upcoming meeting
2nd Wednesdays, 7:30 pm, September through May

Check friendsofworcester.org for details.