

Board delays vote on Monastery site plan

Staff directed to prepare resolution outlining three conditions of approval

By David Ambro

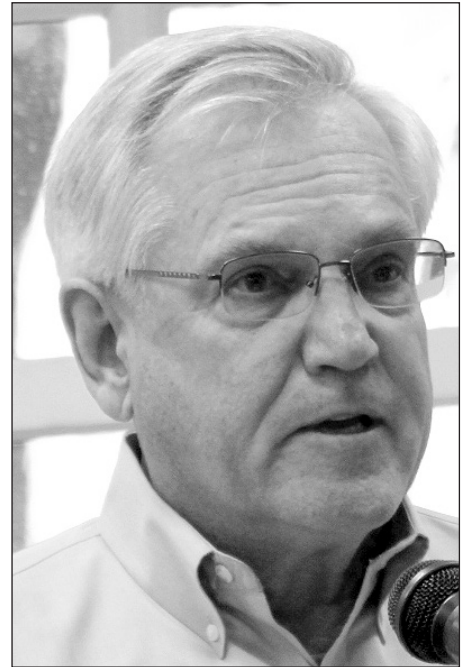
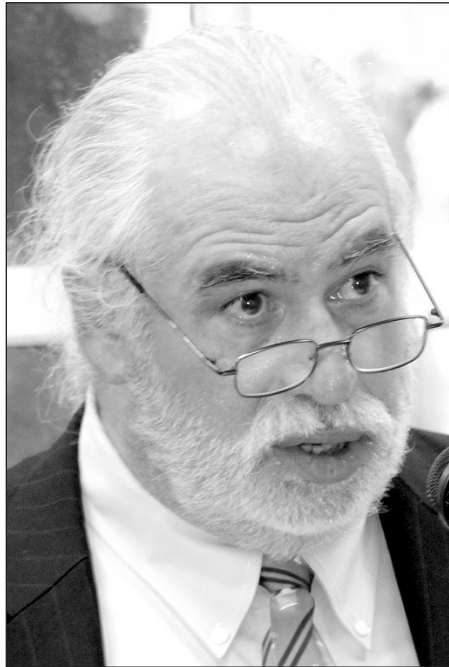
After a brief public hearing, the Head of the Harbor Planning Board balked Tuesday, June 10, at approving the site plan for Monastery of the Glorious Ascension to build a church on the 4.6-acre historic Timothy Smith House property at 481 North Country Road (Route 25A) in St. James.

At the Planning Board meeting Tuesday, board attorney Chris Bianco and Monastery attorney Joseph Buzzell offered detailed briefings about the church application, which has played out since 2020.

It was initially rejected by the planning board. Then, the Head of the Harbor Village Board of Trustees approved a special use permit and State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) negative declaration (no further environmental review is necessary). A group of residents then filed a lawsuit against the Village. The case was dismissed last month with a favorable decision for the church, State Supreme Court Judge Maureen Liccione affirming the trustees' approval.

The process is now in its final stages, and planning board site plan approval is required for a building permit to be issued. The Planning Board is now considering the site plan application to build a 3,341-square-foot church with seating for 97 people, a 982-square-foot wrap-around porch, and a gravel parking area for 35 cars. Mr. Buzzell defined where the building will be located on the historic site, once the home of Timothy Smith, an heir to town founder Richard Smith, and said that the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) determined there would be no negative impact on the Timothy Smith home or the St. James Historic District.

Mr. Bianco told the board that the decision in the lawsuit affirms the Village Board of Trustees' decision, and it is clear that religious organizations must receive land use approval if they conform to the village code, which the monastery plan does. Mr. Bianco said renewed public opposition based on the incorrect square footage of the church in the court decision is



MIXED MESSAGES: After the Monastery for the Glorious Ascension site plan was discussed by attorneys (from left) Joseph Buzzell, Chris Bianco and Joseph Bollhofer, members of the Head of the Harbor Village Planning Board (below) confer about the application. **-David Ambro photos**



unjustified, considering the full context of the decision. He said the Planning Board is now obligated to consider the monastery site application.

After the presentation by the attorneys, Planning Board Chairman Harlan Fischer, as he had done at the previous meeting about the site plan, asked about the excavation of the basement. He said that at 10.58 feet deep, the 3,100 square foot basement will result in 1,309 cubic yards of material. "We want to know what will be done with that?" he asked.

Mr. Buzzell called up the project architect, Mark Wittenberg, of East Northport, who said it is estimated that the excavation will result in 850 cubic yards of fill, which will be used as on-site grading material. Mr.

Buzzell offered some additional details about where it would be located on the site, and he said the church will submit to the village an excavation plan showing where the fill material will be deposited.

Mr Fischer then opened the public hearing. The only speaker was attorney Joseph Bollhofer, chairman of the Head of the Harbor Zoning Board of Appeals, who has been an outspoken opponent of the church project. He told the Planning Board that State Supreme Court Judge Maureen Liccione, in her decision dismissing the lawsuit, relied on erroneous information provided to her and said the church is 2,000 square feet. He urged that the court record be corrected before the planning board voted on the site plan.

"There is a big disconnect here. I'm certainly not comfortable with it. I'm not the decision-maker, but I just don't think it is fair that there were various misrepresentations," Mr. Bollhofer said. "I think this hearing should be held open until there is clarification from the court as to whether these misunderstandings are material to the court's decision... We need to know what the size of the proposed structure is and whether or not the court understood that when it made its decision."

Mr. Fischer asked Mr. Bianco if going back to the court for clarification is a possibility. Mr. Bianco said there is no legal mechanism to do so, and even if there were, the court had in evidence

the exact site plan that is being considered now by the planning board and was approved by the trustees.

As to the Bollhofer claim that the dimensions on the site plan do not reflect that the square footage is the building's "footprint," Mr. Buzzell agreed to submit a revised plan with "footprint" written next to the square footage numbers.

With there being no more speakers, Mr. Fischer asked for a motion to approve the site plan with three conditions: 1) that the excavation plan be submitted, 2) that there be final Suffolk County Department of Health Services approval before the building permit is issued, and 3) that the corrected wording on the site plan be submitted to the Village. The planning board members looked at one another, but none of them was willing to offer a resolution for approval.

Mr. Bianco asked if they wanted to talk about the application and then consider the resolution. Village Engineer Dan Falasco then recommended that, in the alternative, the board could consider a motion to direct the staff to prepare a resolution outlining the conditions that can be considered at a future meeting. There was another moment of reluctance by board members, but then the board voted 4-1 to direct the staff to prepare a resolution for a future meeting. Trustee Dale Salzberg cast the lone vote in opposition to the resolution. The board did not indicate when it would consider the matter next.



Architect Mark Wittenberg (right) responds to questions from the Head of the Harbor Planning Board Chairman Harlan Fischer about excavation on the Timothy Smith House property.