

First conservation development gets nod from board

By LUCILLE BENOIT, Breeze & Observer Managing Editor

SMITHFIELD – A strip of forest off Burlingame Road could have become a collection of cookie-cutter house lots but instead will retain more than 100 acres of open space and greenery with last week's master plan approval of the town's first conservation development.

Developer William Santaro was headed to a cluster concept three years ago when Burlingame Estates was first introduced. The subdivision hearings drew more than 100 residents opposed to the plan early in the process. When complete, the 52-lot subdivision would have stretched from Log Road to Latham Farm Road.

"It was a very contentious project initially," recalled Frederick Presley, director of planning and economic development.

The Planning Board gave it master plan approval three years ago but required the subdivision road tie into Log Road, he said. The road issue caused the project to languish. The Town Council finally determined that the road requirement would not go forward. It vetoed the Log Road crossing because it would have crossed major wetlands, Presley said.

Meanwhile, Santaro agreed to step back and began numerous meetings with Presley. This year a new tool, conservation development, recently supported as an ordinance by the Town Council, emerged as an option for the project.

The conservation zoning was similar to the cluster plan the developer had already proposed. The process, however, included a much more formulated process and fewer things left to the developer's whims, said Presley.

The first step of the conservation plan was to see what the project would look like under a conventional development layout. The cluster development and a conventional development both would have allowed 52 lots of about 2 acres on the 139-acre property.

The final number of lots approved last week under the conservation plan is 38 lots, mostly a half acre, with 114 acres put into the hands of the Smithfield Land Trust.

"It's a win/win for everyone," said Presley.

Although Santaro will create fewer lots, the development costs will be lower with fewer roads, from 9,000 feet of roadways to 3,000, less site work, creation of a community

atmosphere with the closer grouping of homes and less impact on the environment. The entire development will have only five small detention ponds instead of the significant wetlands impacts it could have if developed under conventional project lines.

"This is a lot better project at the end of the day," said Presley.

Planning Board members heard the description of the conservation proposal and unanimously gave it master plan level approval Thursday, Sept. 28.

It now has to continue through the rest of the process but the developer's attorney Brian Thalmann said they hoped to start the first phase in the spring of 2007. The development will be done in five phases beginning at the intersection of Latham Farm Road and Cedar Forest Road and now looping back into Burlingame Road.

The first phase will involve six houses but market conditions will dictate the timeframe for the next phases, said Thalmann.

Santaro credited the work of Presley in directing the plan.

"The credit goes to Fred," he said, "for his creativity and vision."

Santaro, a town resident since 1965, said he was willing to work with the concept to try to move forward with something the town wanted to accomplish. Instituting the conservation zoning where feasible seemed to fill that bill, he said, after the meeting.