

Downstate developer meets upstate resistance

By Patricia Doxsey, Freeman staff

PINE PLAINS - For decades, the Durst name has been synonymous with premier real estate development in New York City.

The family is responsible for developing skyscrapers around Times Square and Grand Central Terminal and has earned a reputation as a leader in "green development."

But the reputation the family enjoys in and around midtown Manhattan seems to be carrying little sway with the residents of two Northern Dutchess communities. Here, the Durst Organization has met opposition over its proposal to create a massive golf community geared toward Manhattanites looking for a retreat from the downstate metropolis.

A COMMUNITY group calling itself Pine Plains United has formed in opposition to the project. And on Thursday, about 300 residents of the towns of Pine Plains and Milan turned out for the first of a series of public hearings on the project, which could result in nearly 1,000 new housing units in the two rural communities.



The hearing was held by the Pine Plains Planning Board as part of its review of the project under the State Environmental Quality Review Act.

THE DURST Organization has partnered with Landmark Land Co. to create a "vacation and second home community" on roughly 2,200 acres straddling the Milan-Pine Plains border. About 1,772 acres are in Pine Plains and 428 are in Milan.

Dan Stone, of the Chazen Cos., an engineering firm, said the project envisioned by the Dursts builds on the vision that the property's former owner, ice cream magnate Tom Carvel, had for the land in the 1970s when he built 17 homes and a golf course before abandoning the project.

"The Dursts want to do it better ... and they will be successful, just as they have been successful in their developments in Manhattan," Stone told the crowd gathered last week in the Stissing Mountain High School auditorium.

STONE SAID the Durst plan calls for the construction of 951 homes, some single-family and some attached, along with private recreational amenities, including a golf course to be designed by the award-winning Landmark Land Co.

He said the Dursts are committed to protecting the environment of the region and have designed a project that will have minimal impact on the ecology of the land and on the visual attributes of the community.

"Our goal for the Carvel land is to create a second-home, premiere community that is a model of sustainable development," Stone said.

And because the project is being designed as a "master planned second-home community," marketed primarily to metropolitan New York City residents, it will have little negative impact on the Pine Plains school district or other services, he said.

"Older folks who have fledged their children and have some disposal income are the kinds of people who are buying these homes," Stone said.

BUT MANY of those attending last week's hearing doubted the accuracy of studies used by the company to show the slight impact on services, and they challenged the company's commitment to preserving the rural character of the land.

Critics say the project, which could double the population of the community, has the potential to crush Milan and Pine Plains under the weight of thousands of new residents.

"This plan doesn't have any of the earmarks of a second-home community," said John Ferrell, who lives on Tripp Road in Pine Plains.

OTHER RESIDENTS echoed that sentiment, with several asking who would buy an upscale home in a golf community in which the golf course is closed for several months every year.

Becky Thorton, president of the Dutchess Land Conservancy, criticized the company for including lawns in their calculation of open space. "Only a small portion of the community conservation area is not constrained to development already," she said.

Former Pine Plains Supervisor Scott Chase, a professional planner and executive director of the Dutchess County Water and Wastewater Authority, called the project an shining example of suburban sprawl. He said it's "not a development we should want our town to be."

ALSO CONCERNED about the impact on the community was Ross Pattison of Hicks Hill Road in Pine Plains, who said the planned development would "wreck" the western half of the community.

However, his wife, former Dutchess County Executive Lucille Pattison, didn't share her husband's fears. "I don't think this will happen in our lifetimes," she said.

PINE PLAINS Planning Board Chairman Donald Bartles said town planners share a number of the concerns voiced by residents, including the claim that the development will be solely a second-home community. "Right now, we're just listening," he said.

WHILE THE board is moving forward with the environmental review of the project, it cannot issue a statement of findings - a final determination on the project - until the town lifts its building moratorium. And that, Bartles said, is not likely to happen until the town adopts its first-ever zoning ordinance.

Bartles said the Durst Organization has agreed to accept whatever terms for development the town establishes through its zoning ordinance for the portion of the property that lies within the town.

ADDITIONAL public hearings on the Durst proposal will be held:

* Feb. 29 at 7 p.m. in Stissing Mountain High School.

* March 6 at 5 p.m. in the Milan Town Hall.

* March 12 at 7 p.m. in Stissing Mountain High School.

Written comments will be accepted by the Pine Plains Planning Board through April 2.