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Neighbors of mall voice worries over rock blasting

By KAREN LOVETT Staff Writer

klovett@nashuatelegraph.com

MERRIMACK – Concerns about rock blasting continue to jar neighbors of a proposed outlet mall project, and several have asked to be included in a survey that would protect them if damage occurs.

However, mall developer Chelsea Property Group has already extended the survey well beyond what's required. On Tuesday, the planning board had not made a determination on the question by press time.

Chelsea seeks to build 135 high-end shops on 170 acres west of Exit 10 on the F.E. Everett Turnpike. The land would need to be leveled and filled in order to accommodate the building. An estimated 800,000 to 1,000,000 cubic yards of rock material would be blasted over several months.

Prior to blasting operations, the contractor is required to conduct a preblast survey, in which company representatives visit homes within 1,000 feet to record their current state in the event of problems later. The preblast analysis also requires consideration of utilities, such as gas and water lines.

Industry standards typically call for homes or buildings within 250 feet to be surveyed beforehand, but for months, project neighbors have asked that Chelsea's proposed 1,000-foot limit be extended.

Spruce Street resident Beth Burns said her home was damaged when blasting occurred to build Exit 10 on the F.E. Everett Turnpike. Board members questioned whether she documented the damage. Burns said she reported it at Town Hall and that her complaint "fell on deaf ears."

"Don't we deserve it?" Burns asked, regarding the survey. "With all this rock that's involved, sure we do."

Fellow Spruce Street resident Nancy Harrington said sheetrock in her home cracked during the same blasting period on the turnpike, and she had a preblast survey. An insurance company determined the damage was a result of house settling, so she was left to foot the bill.

Harrington suggested an alternate avenue for residents who may not be included in the survey area.

Board member Alistair Millns also backed the idea. "Given that Chelsea would want this project to be successful and everybody to be happy, I don't think increasing it to 1,500 would break the bank," Millns said.

He calculated that in the residential area north and west of the property, 21 properties fall within the 1,000-foot zone, and 29 outside. Millns suggested that if a resident outside the survey area finds a problem related to the rock blasting "all hell will break loose."

"Everyone's going to jump all over you," he said to Chelsea representatives, adding that he'd encourage Chelsea to commit to revisit its stance or change it now.

Danielle DeVita, senior director of development and acquisitions, said Chelsea's stance on a 1,000-foot radius had nothing to do with money.

"We feel it's four times what's required," she said. "It's going above and beyond what's required of us . . . We've been pushed very, very far on this and we've done what we've been asked to do . . . It's absolutely sufficient as far as we're concerned."

Jim Errico, of the town's geotechnical consultant, GZA GeoEnvironmental, said, "I personally feel 1,000 feet is adequate in this situation."

The board, its consultants and Chelsea also reviewed the entire blasting plan by Sanborn, Head & Associates. Copies of the plan and all aspects of Chelsea's plans are available in the town's community development department.

The lengthy document requires that the contractor will conduct blasting on Monday through Friday from 9 a.m.-4 p.m.; that monitoring wells for surface water, groundwater deep bedrock groundwater will be installed and examined before, during and for five years after construction; and for each blast, logs would be kept recording spacing, layout, detonators, loads, seismograph readings and locations.

It also covers many other factors, including the amount of material to be removed, sketches of drill patterns, depth of drill holes, total pounds and the specific, allowable types of explosives.

The planning board is scheduled to meet next week for further site plan review.

Karen Lovett can be reached at 594-6402 or klovett@nashuatelegraph.com

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