

# Switchel Proposal

printed here because of their similarity of construction. For other opinions, see Letters to the Editor, page 20

## Why I'm Not In Favor of the Proposed Development

by Brad Garton

Lately I've been hearing many arguments (often presented as the "facts") in favor of the proposed development of the Beer-Kugler tract here in Roosevelt. I'm unconvinced by most of them, and I am concerned that the issues surrounding the proposal aren't receiving the close scrutiny they deserve. It is important to keep in mind that this decision will dramatically shape Roosevelt's future—a decision to develop cannot be rescinded.

Most of the arguments revolve around monetary issues, and with good reason. Roosevelt is facing some thorny financial problems, and the tax burden being placed upon residents is rapidly becoming unbearable. How will the Switchel proposal bring tax relief to Roosevelt? The arguments I've heard fall into three basic categories: 1) greater tax base; 2) school budget relief; and 3) sewage treatment expense assistance. I don't believe that the proposed development will achieve the benefits desired in these areas. The problems I see in these arguments:

**Greater Tax Base**—The general idea is that if the Borough budget can be shared by more people, the cost per individual family will be less. What is ignored in this equation is the changes in the budget required by the development. Items such as police protection, fire protection, water costs (Will a new well be needed? Is it even possible to make further demands upon the aquifer?), sewage costs (discussed later), general maintenance costs of "open" areas, street and road costs will all need to be increased. Even simple items such as snow removal will be more expensive. I can easily imagine that an increase in Roosevelt's population will be accompanied by a concomitant (and offsetting) increase in the municipal budget.

Most municipalities seeking to increase their tax base try to attract industrial or commercial development. Residential development provides the lowest tax return for the land used.

The Switchel proposal will necessitate the rezoning of land that is designated "industrial." I don't think this is a good idea—where else will Roosevelt allow commercial development?

**School Budget Relief**—The school budget represents the largest portion of the taxes paid by Rooseveltians. I should make it clear that I don't want to see our school closed; I think it is a vital part of our community and (as a parent with a child rapidly approaching school age) I think it is very important for us to maintain control over the school our children use. I don't believe, however, that the proposed development will do much to alleviate the school money problems.

The major budget difficulty with the school is that the facility is not being used to capacity. Residents wind up having to pay more per child, and moneys coming from the state are reduced because of the smaller enrollment. The new development could ease these problems by providing more school-age children, thus "reducing" school overhead costs and bringing in more state money. A large portion of the Switchel development is to include 1-bedroom units. Are these the best type of houses to attract families with school children? It is also important to remember that Roosevelt must pay a significant sum for high-school education (per child). The number of families moving into the new houses with teenage children may offset the number with primary-school children.

Finally (to paraphrase Adeline Weiner [responding to *Understanding the Property Tax Increase*, June *Bulletin*, Ed.]), I feel that the school should adapt to the needs of the community, rather than Roosevelt designing itself after the school. The School Board, the Planning Board, and the Borough Council should jointly investigate creative solutions to the school funding problems. A unified set of priorities and possible alternatives (perhaps including development)

would be a better approach to the school budget crisis; not a presentation by an outside agency with interests other than the Borough's integrity at heart.

**Sewage Treatment Expense Assistance**—This seems the most compelling argument for allowing any development in Roosevelt. One of the items in the Borough budget that will wreak monetary havoc in the future is the cost of the sewage treatment plant upgrade. If a developer were willing to underwrite a significant portion of this cost, then I think the offer should be considered very carefully by the Council. Has Switchel proposed anything like this?

If the sewage treatment plant problem is not addressed, then Roosevelt will be committing "sewage treatment suicide" if development is allowed. A large part of the sewage treatment problem is inflow infiltration. A development would only exacerbate this problem, to say nothing of the strain imposed upon our decaying treatment facilities. Even if our sewage treatment plant were completely upgraded to satisfy the Department of Environmental Quality consent order, the permit may not allow for the number of dwellings in the Switchel proposal. What studies have been done to show the impact of the development on the treatment plant? We cannot assume that our facilities will miraculously adapt to whatever we build. The sewage treatment problems we currently face will seem mild compared to what would result from the uninformed abuse of our capabilities.

### Other Arguments

There are several other arguments I've heard in favor of the development that bear mentioning. One follows a "keeping-up-with-the-Joneses" type of logic that I find a little silly. I've seen a number of comparisons of Roosevelt

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with other communities in our area, the implication being that Roosevelt is somewhat "out of step" with other municipalities. I'm certain that it is—that is one of the primary reasons that I moved to Roosevelt. Not so long ago, the people of towns like Plainsboro and Dutch Neck decided to utterly destroy any charm or personality their villages possessed by allowing rampant development of surrounding land. They are certainly not the models I wish to use for Roosevelt. Remember, we control the land with in our Borough boundaries, and it is up to us to make the decision as to how that land should be used.

Related to this argument is the statement: "The developer might sue us to allow development, the legal costs for the Borough will be a further drain on our budget." This is shaky ground upon which to base an important decision. I would hate to see Roosevelt make a bad choice because of some imagined fears. If imagined fears are to be a part of our decision-making process, then let me raise another: Will the development throw

us out of compliance with the infamous Mt. Laurel decisions?

Much of what I object to in the proposal stems from a simple lack of information. It seems that many questions surrounding the project have not been answered and are not being investigated: Will the sewage treatment plant handle the extra demand? Can we provide an adequate water supply? What will be the fiscal impact of the development? How (emphasis on real data) will it help with the school financial situation? Above all, how will the proposed development change our quality of life? One of my first reactions to the proposal was dismay that the Planning Board's zoning ordinance (which has taken a hard look at many of these considerations) was so easily disregarded. Is the current proposal better (or at least as good) as what the Planning Board decided?

Finally, I understand that there is some pressure for a decision by the Borough Council soon. Within twelve months, regulations concerning the development of wetlands in New Jersey will take effect that will require

modification of the Switchel proposal. There are reasons for these new regulations, and I imagine at least part of them is the growing realization among New Jersey citizens as to just how precious land—open, undeveloped land—is. I grew up in Indiana where open space was relatively easy to find. Moving to New Jersey, I discovered that by limiting our environmental horizons we are limiting ourselves (another reason I chose to live in Roosevelt).

One of my favorite parts of the drive into Roosevelt is the stretch of road just prior to Guyette's Amoco station where the trees grow up on either side. The green coolness I get when passing through this area reaches me in a profoundly emotional way, signalling "This is where you live...." Imagine that gone, imagine that unavailable to our children. Roosevelt is a unique community with a unique history—I don't wish to see this usurped by the pursuit of easy solutions (possibly imaginary) to our money problems.