

NEWS

Whitpain residents voice concerns about proposed sober living home



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WHITPAIN – For residents concerned about a proposed sober living home on Stonybrook Drive in Blue Bell, the Feb. 13 zoning hearing board was their chance to finally question the project’s representative, Lisa Medvetz, directly about the proposal.

And question her they did.

For Medvetz, the Q&A with residents was clearly an exasperating experience, as an avalanche of critical questions over the course of three hours found her running in circles in her efforts to defend a project that appears clearly unwanted.

A general surgeon for Wayne Memorial Hospital in Honesdale, Medvetz is hoping to secure a sober living recovery center for nine female tenants at her childhood home at 813 Stonybrook Drive. The proposal, which was filed on behalf of her mother who owns the home, is under review by the zoning hearing board because it does not expressly conform to the residential zoning of the neighborhood.



The board can grant her a variance, or relief from the zoning restrictions, after considering the merits of her application.

The board held its first meeting on the proposal on Jan. 17. The second was held Feb. 13. A third has already been scheduled for March 12. The board has 45 days to render its decision after concluding its review of the proposal.

The Feb. 13 gathering saw a packed turnout of residents, many of whom were eager to question Medvetz directly and offer their feelings on the project. Members of the zoning hearing board itself were also given the chance to question her.

Opposition to the project from residents who neighbor the home had already been percolating for weeks prior to the board hearings. A residents website under the name WhitpainResidents.org has rallied residents against the proposal by seeking signatures on its Change.org site.

Opponents assert that the three-bedroom home on Stonybrook Road is not adequate to accommodate nine tenants. They have said they fear that an overcrowded home would lead to parking headaches, trash and general decline in property values in the area, among other concerns.

Residents who questioned Medvetz were also concerned about the type of tenants who would be living there and the depth of screening and background checks that would be employed to identify those with concerning criminal histories and those vulnerable to relapses in substance use.

Medvetz, who operates a second recovery home in Norristown for men, said the responsibility for overseeing the Blue Bell location would fall on her and her longtime friend and business partner, Brandon Woodruff, who himself is a recovering addict.

She said the “intake” process for applicants would entail immediate drug testing and that a “zero-tolerance” policy would be employed for any tenant found to be abusing drugs or other prohibited substances while living there.

“If someone has a positive drug test, they will no longer be able to stay,” she said, adding that drug testing would take place randomly, which could be daily, weekly or at longer intervals.

Despite her assurances to residents and the board that her selected tenants would pose no threat to the community, Medvetz repeatedly faced question casting doubt on her qualifications to perform the work and her ability to maintain 24-hour supervision of the facility with a limited staff.

Growing noticeably frustrated and confrontational over the course of the meeting, Medvetz refused to answer questions at times, particularly those that she felt compromised medical privacy and were irrelevant to the specific zoning request before the board.

When questioned by MediaNews Group during a break in the meeting if she was surprised by the strong public reaction to the proposal, she said she didn't expect the level of "virulence."

"This [reaction at the meeting] is actually mild," she said, adding that she has received many negative phone calls, text messages and comments in social media.

"I think it's an emotional response of 'we don't want it in our own backyard,'" she said.

Medvetz said she's prepared to keep fighting should the proposal fail in Whitpain.

"I don't know what the [zoning hearing board] will decide. I'm prepared to go to federal court," she said. "We have a lawyer in Washington who's watching this case."

The March 12 continuation of the proposal will again be held in the science center theater at Montgomery County Community College at 340 DeKalb Pike in Blue Bell. The meeting will begin at 6 p.m.
