

Local Group Opposes Massive Development Proposed for Westerly Golf Course

New London Day
Carrie Czerwinski
12/09/2023

Westerly — A local grassroots organization that opposed a failed attempt to build a golf resort at the Winnapaug Country Club finds itself opposing a new plan by the same developer that could see the only public golf course in Westerly replaced with a massive \$703.5 million affordable housing development.

“Our natural resources, once they’re gone, they’re gone forever. You can’t replace them, and that is our primary concern,” Margaret Fusaro, a member of Keep Westerly Green, said on Friday on behalf of the group.

The opposition to the 2,300-unit low- and middle-income housing development, proposed by Winn Properties, LLC, includes environmental, zoning and infrastructure concerns and the impact to Westerly taxpayers.

In a Sept. 19 application for a letter of eligibility from RI Housing, Rhode Island’s housing and finance agency, Winn said 690 of the units would be 700- and 800-square-foot affordable housing units.

RI housing approved the application in October, allowing Winn Properties, LLC, whose principal is course owner Jill Scola, to pursue a comprehensive development permit.

The comprehensive permit process reduces the number of town approvals needed for the project, makes the approval process faster and allows higher density developments in exchange for the developer guaranteeing a percentage of the units would be set aside for low- to moderate-income households.

The application shows that the 1,610 market-rate two-bedroom units would rent at \$3,000 per month, while 594 workforce housing units would rent at \$1,230 per month for individuals earning up to \$60,000 per year and \$1,764 per month for individuals earning up to \$73,760. An additional 96 affordable units would rent between \$1,230 and \$1,383 per month depending on unit size and income.

The median income in Westerly for a single individual is \$82,880. A family of three at 60% of area median income earns \$60,000 per year.

Winn also received a letter of eligibility for a \$253.9 million, 58-building, 860-unit development with 288 affordable units on the site in August.

Assistant Zoning Official Samantha Patton said via email on Wednesday that Winn had not submitted an application for the property yet, but the zoning department anticipated one would be coming “very soon.”

Fusaro said Keep Westerly Green supports affordable housing and thoughtful development but opposes the new proposal for many of the same reasons it opposed a prior application to build residences and a hotel, among other improvements, on the site.

Fusaro said the group questioned the suitability of the property and surrounding neighborhoods to host upwards of 5,000 additional residents.

She noted that transportation, shopping, and health care is not available within distances recommended for affordable housing locations and the group believes the project would overburden local public utilities, roadways, schools, hospitals and the all-volunteer Dunn’s Corners Fire Department. It could also create a burden for taxpayers, who may end up footing the bill for infrastructure improvements to support the potential 20% increase to the town’s population that would be added within just 1.5 square miles.

The group, with its mission of preserving and improving the town's open space and conservation of its natural resources, also has significant environmental concerns.

The group says that, of Westerly's 47,870 acres, only 6.9% comprises publicly accessible green space, and development of up to 58 1-, 2- and 3-story buildings on the Donald Ross-designed historic golf course, designated as green space by the town's comprehensive plan, would significantly reduce that percentage.

She also said the proposed site has been designated a Natural Heritage Area by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management due to endangered plants and wildlife on the property, and the development would put those species at risk.

Additionally, she noted that the property is adjacent to Winnapaug Pond, and the proposed development would endanger the fragile ecosystem in and around the state's second-largest salt pond

