

Mayor breaks ground on special needs housing

by John Koster

Allendale Mayor Vince Barra joined state and local dignitaries last week to break ground on the special needs housing approved and funded for one quadrant of Orchard Commons, the tract that Barra and the council saved for use as a park while the bulldozer was on the site.

The buildings are designed to accommodate individuals with developmental disabilities within the borders of Allendale.

The cluster of buildings will include four two-bedroom units of 900 square feet and two one-bedroom units of 500 square feet. The configuration of the buildings will create an interior courtyard. Handicapped-accessible parking is planned adjacent to each building. All units will be located on a single floor to minimize the need to climb stairs.

State and federal funding has made it possible to construct the housing without direct tax impact on Allendale residents, as Barra had hoped. The outside agencies were reportedly delighted that Allendale located the special needs housing within the borough instead of attempting to locate the units elsewhere in urban neighborhoods of the tri-county area under a Regional Contribution Agreement.

Guests invited to the groundbreaking included Shari DiPalma, executive director of Madeline Corporation; Tom Toronto, president of Bergen County's United Way; architect James Virgona; contractor John Dalo, owner of JD Pioneer; and Robert Guarasci, president of the New Jersey Community Development Corporation.

Mayor Barra and other council members, building on the original initiative of Councilman Jim Strauch, worked out a last-minute agreement to buy the land in increments from owner Ramon Alvarez, who had already received site plan approval from the Allendale Planning Board to allow construction of 24 townhouses on the 3.4-acre site clustered in eight buildings.

Neighbors objected to the impact the townhouse development at the West Orchard Avenue and Franklin Turnpike property would have had on drainage downstream. Concerns also included that development's effect on property values and local traffic.

After some last-minute negotiations, Alvarez offered an attractive price. Barra and the council were able to use a grant from the Passaic River Valley Coalition, a series of Bergen County Open Space and New Jersey Green Acres grants, and donations from private citizens to fund the purchase of the land from Alvarez without using tax dollars.

Most of the site has already been turned into a passive park with ornamental trees and shrubs, a stone entry gate donated by Alvarez, and walking paths. The park was dedicated at a ceremony earlier this year.

