



## Mendham Twp. votes to rezone ex-farm property for houses, but might lease it to preservation group

pitneyhouse.jpg

The 1722 farmhouse on the Pitney property in Mendham Township would likely be demolished if the property is sold to a developer, but it would be preserved under a proposal to lease the property to a citizens group, Friends of Pitney Farm. (Courtesy of Friends of Pitney Farm)

**Ben Horowitz | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com** By **Ben Horowitz | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com**

**Email the author | Follow on Twitter**

on July 29, 2015 at 1:19 PM, updated July 29, 2015 at 1:41 PM

**MENDHAM TOWNSHIP** — The Mendham Township Committee voted Tuesday to allow the building of houses on part of a longtime farm property it purchased in 2009 with the intention to preserve it as open space.

With a 4-1 vote that overrode the planning board's recommendation, the committee agreed to rezone five of the 12 acres at the Pitney Farm, which include a farmhouse built in 1722. The other seven acres will remain as preserved open space.

But all is not lost for a citizens group, **Friends of Pitney Farm**, which fought the rezoning proposal and is so anxious to preserve the property it is willing to take it over.

Committee member Frank Cioppettini, who voted for the rezoning, also made a proposal for the Friends to lease the five acres.

Teresa Finlay, a leader of the Friends group, said that while the group is "disappointed" by the rezoning vote, it is "excited" by the proposed lease.

---

### **RELATED: Planners opposed rezoning the property**

---

The group would keep the farmhouse intact and would convert the property into an arts and educational center, she and other leaders have said.

"We have to sit with (the committee) and discuss it," she said.

Under the plan, the Friends group would enter into a 99-year lease for the property. The township would continue to own it but the Friends group would be responsible for maintenance and paying taxes. The Friends have until Sept. 1 to respond to the proposal.

Committee member Diana Orban Brown, the sole member to vote against the rezoning, said she supports the idea of leasing the property to the Friends group. "I would love to see something like this happen," she said.

The township purchased the 12-acre property in 2009 for \$4 million, including \$1.5 million from Morris County's Preservation Trust Fund. The Pitney family had owned the property since 1722.

County officials confirmed that the preservation funds cover the seven undeveloped acres, but not the five acres where the farmhouse and other buildings including a large barn are located, so they could be developed.

Under plans to develop the parcel, the five acres would be auctioned to a developer, so the fate of the farmhouse appears to hinge on whether the property is sold or leased to the Friends group.

The township committee also passed a second resolution explaining its reasons for overruling the planning board. The resolution notes that the Pitney family once owned hundred of acres there and sold of most of it to developers, so selling those five acres would be "consistent with the actions of the Pitney family."

The 12-acre property is now surrounded by subdivisions, and the resolution points out that the new zoning is "compatible with the surrounding land uses."

The resolution also points out that the township's last master plan re-examination took place back in 2008, and "does not reflect the reality of these economic times."

"The residents deserve the opportunity to recoup funds ... and thus reduce their tax burden," the resolution says.

**Ben Horowitz may be reached at [bhorowitz@njadvancemedia.com](mailto:bhorowitz@njadvancemedia.com). Follow him on Twitter @HorowitzBen. Find NJ.com on Facebook.**

© 2015 NJ.com. All rights reserved.