

Room to grow

Shabbos House looks to expand amid water, property value concerns

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"There's a very little house on Fuller Road, and for nearly 30 years it's been working to serve its community, and that community is pretty much my neighborhood - UAlbany," said Martin Gnaick, who attended the Guilderland Zoning Board meeting Wednesday, Sept. 19, to show his support for the owners of Shabbos House synagogue, who are trying to get approval to expand for their facility.

Gnaick, along with several members of the local Jewish community, came to offer support to Rabbi Mendel Rubin and his wife, Raizy, owners of the Shabbos House, a "home-style synagogue" that serves as a meeting place and religious retreat for many Jewish students attending the University at Albany.

The small, two-bedroom house with one kitchen and bathroom located on Fuller Road is considered to be a "home away from home" by many of the students, who walk there to enjoy an occasional home-cooked meal, study session, or to celebrate any of the Jewish holidays that occur during the school year.

Sheryl Hoffman, a junior at the University Albany studying history and Judaic studies, said Shabbos House makes it convenient for her to be a student and practice her religion at the same time.

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"For me, being an observant Jew and a responsible student is important. If Shabbos House had not been there, I'd have to decide whether to attend classes, or observe my holiday," she said. "Shabbos House gives me the opportunity to do both."

Hoffman is one of thousands of Jewish students that attend the University at Albany, which has one of the largest populations of Jewish students in the country. Shabbos house was started in 1976 by Rubin's parents. Since then, it has been an escape for many of these students, who often miss their families and traditions while living on campus.

Sara Berg, a Guilderland resident who is pursuing a doctorate at the university, is one of these students.

"For the last two years Shabbos House has really been my home away from home. Mendal, Raizy and the kids have really been wonderful," she said.

About three years ago, the Rubins, who live in the small house with their five children, decided they needed to expand Shabbos House to provide a more reasonable amount of living space for their children and guests.

However, they ran into some trouble in the early planning stages.

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Guilderland for about 40 years. She said the development in which she lives, which is close to Shabbos House, was built on a former swamp. This has resulted in water problems for many residents. After speaking with the highway department and another town engineer, Mastromarchi strongly advised the board not to allow a new Shabbos House to be built.

The Rubins said that they were aware of the town's water problems, and consulted a locally respected engineer, Daniel Hershberg, to construct a plan to make sure their new housing development wouldn't cause any additional water problems for surrounding residents.

Initially, Hershberg developed a plan with the Rubins that would discharge their groundwater to another drainage location, Fuller Road and Western Avenue.

Yet their plan was rejected by Albany County, which said that there were already existing drainage problems at the location, and suggested that Hershberg and the Rubins consult with the town's main firm, Boswell Engineering, to come up with a better plan.

Though Boswell wasn't available for comment, the Rubins said they put off the project for several months.

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"When you have 30 people in this room it fills up nicely," said Rubin, describing the dining room where the Rubins entertain about 45 mostly UAlbany guests for their Friday Night Dinner every other week. "We feel like we are cramming people in, and that's not healthy."

Adam Kris, a junior at the university and volunteer firefighter for the Mckownville Fire Department is a regular guest at Shabbos House. He told zoning board members on Wednesday why he feels Shabbos House is too small.

"Every time Shabbos House hosts a meal, myself, along with a few other students, have to remove all couches out of the house to convert the living area into a synagogue, then into a dining area, and then back into a living room when the meal is over," he said.

Yet some nearby residents weren't happy when they found out about the Rubins' expansion plans. How would this huge piece of property affect the value of their land? Would they end up paying more taxes to keep the large home running?

There was an even bigger concern for residents in the neighborhood: storm water management.

Andrea Mastromarchi has live at 42 West Parkwood St. in

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Hershberger, who has years of engineering experience, said he has used this method several times in various locations throughout the town. He presented it to zoning board members at the Wednesday meeting.

The board seemed receptive to Hershberg's plan, but said collaboration with Boswell was essential for them to move forward on the project.

"Bottom line, we want Boswell to sign off on the plan. That removes one of the major hurdles," said Peter Barber, chairman of the Guilderland Zoning Board.

Barber said the board has been reluctant to make any decisions so far because Hershberg and the Rubins kept changing their plans.

"We always wait to make sure we have all the necessary documents," he said, adding that it would be unreasonable for the board to make a decision without written comments from the town's appointed engineer.

Hershberg said Boswell will meet with him some time this week, and the zoning board plans to go from there.

The next Guilderland Zoning Board meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, Oct. 3 at 7:30 p.m.