

Newtown Zoners Hear Episcopal Case

By Kenn Stark

The board of the Episcopal Academy being built on the west side of Route 252 on the former duPont property is pressing the Newtown Township Zoning Hearing Board to have lights on two athletic fields. A hearing on the matter started last Thursday, and will be continued at zoners' regular Jan. 17 session.

When the EA was seeking land development plan approval in the spring of 2006, the school's leaders omitted a request for field lights to avoid complications, but stated then that they would probably pursue the matter at a future date. The future is apparently now --before the new 124-acre facility opens its doors next September, and while the five main buildings and nine athletic fields are still under construction.

Although Article 23 of the zoning code restricts light fixtures for parking lots and pedestrian safety to 20 feet in height, EA officials contend they are entitled to erect 70- and 80-foot-high poles for use on athletic fields. If their interpretation of the code is denied, they are seeking a variance to the height limit.

The start of last week's hearing had been delayed from September to allow time for EA to meet with several neighbors to outline their lighting plans. Not every neighbor had been notified of the private informational session, however, creating some tensions.

"Some of us might not even be here today, if we knew. I'm really annoyed that I wasn't able to be at that Oct. 16 meeting," complained one Farrier Lane resident who was not notified.

Before the two-hour ses-

sion began in earnest, those residents who intended to oppose the application had to be identified and registered as "party protestants," and granted "standing" to cross examine witnesses. Nine residents met the distance from site (less than 200 yards) requirement for standing, while a handful of those in opposition did not.

"The fact that you may be able to see the lights from an eighth of a mile or a half mile away doesn't necessarily mean that you would be aggrieved by that action," Zoning solicitor George Cordes explained to residents who were denied standing.

EA engineer Angelo Capuzzi gave testimony regarding the proposed height and location of eight light poles. Two 80-foot poles and two 70-foot poles would be used to illuminate the football field, while four 70-foot-high light fixtures would be employed on a lacrosse/soccer field.

"By installing the lights at the proposed height, we will be able to properly and safely illuminate the fields and focus the light on the field in order to reduce light spillage on neighboring properties," stated EA attorney Don Petrosa.

It was noted that 16 of the 18 Delco school districts currently have lighted outdoor sports facilities. The 80-, 90- and 100-foot poles recently installed at the Marple-Newtown High School football field utilize the same state-of-the-art "light structure green" directional fixtures that would be used at EA, Petrosa noted.

The EA fields would be illuminated to an average of 50 foot-candles by the proposed eight fixtures. Each pole would support banks of 11 to 13 luminaires in two tiers, with each individual light measuring 27 inches in diameter.

The same company that did the M-N installation, Musco Lighting of Farmingdale, N.J., would do the EA in-

stallation and guarantee the same satisfactory results.

According to Musco representative Robert Zoeller, the light overspill would not exceed .2-foot-candles at the EA property line along Route 252, even with both adjacent fields lit. The large-visor light fixtures used at the M-N site limit overspill to 3.7-foot candles at the edge of neighboring residential properties, he said.

The residential yards behind the Tigers' football field are as little as 35 feet away from the light poles, while the nearest private property to the EA lights would be 290 feet away from the closest light. Traffic on Route 252 would only be about 100 feet from the light poles.

"There should not be any difficulties for anyone travel-

For Lights

ing up or down Route 252," Zoeller said. "You'll be able to tell whether or not the lights are on, but I don't believe we're going to create a situation where there's going to be any kind of safety concerns for drivers."

Some residents were worried about the possibility of EA renting out the lighted fields for nighttime events other than school games or team practices.

"The reassurances that I need are that I'm not going to be inundated with a bunch of kids showing up for athletic events that maybe don't even belong to the school, or certain activities that are conducted that could create chaos in the area," one neighboring resident stated.

"Should the board approve our application, we would

agree and commit that the lighted fields will be used only for Episcopal Academy events and not for rentals to outside groups," Petrosa offered.

EA is also willing to restrict use of the lights to no later than 10 p.m. for games, and not past 6:30 p.m. for practices, if granted approval. By contrast, MNHS is allowed to use their lights until 10:30 p.m., and once a year until 11:30 p.m. for the Bandarama competition.

The testimony of EA experts seemed to allay the fears of most of the concerned residents in attendance. Some were even clever enough to thank the presenters for the "illumination" on the science of field lighting.