

Chicken co-op originator voices frustration to Council

By **DAVID L. SHAW**

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GENEVA — City Council got an earful Wednesday from a frustrated Jeff Henderson.

Henderson, director of the annual Musselman Triathlon in Geneva each summer, received unanimous city Planning Board approval July 21 for a chicken cooperative and a solar panel array on industrially-zoned property he owns at 50 State St.

However, after several neighbors complained at the August Council meeting about the presence of hens, Henderson was advised by letter Aug. 20 to



Henderson

put the brakes on the project. City Planning and Zoning Coordinator Neal Braman said a closer review of the city zoning code as it was applied by the Planning Board to Henderson's project revealed a possible oversight.

Braman said a variance appears to be needed from the required 100-foot buffer from the property line of an adjacent property as outlined in the zoning

code. He added the Planning Board failed to consider this chapter as it pertains to industrial uses.

Henderson replied in an Aug. 21 letter that he was given the Planning Board's approval, and he has no intention of stopping, noting that there are 23 egg-laying hens already on the site.

The Zoning Board of Appeals has not scheduled a meeting to discuss a possible variance. It was suggested that the issue may be resolved without ZBA involvement, but that hasn't happened yet.

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During public comment, Henderson said he proposed a chicken cooperative project two years ago for South Exchange Street.

“Council decided that was not an appropriate place and encouraged me to find another location in an area zoned for raising chickens,” Henderson said. “I found a spot on State Street zoned industrial where a chicken cooperative is allowed. I bought it and with the help of volunteers, it was cleaned up.”

He said he proposed a new project but is still getting resistance from some Council members.

“It’s not a city code issue. It’s not an ordinance issue. This is a permitted use in an industrial zone. It’s all been vetted, discussed and approved,” Henderson said. “I’m tired of discussing this and I’m sure you’re tired of me bringing it before you. But a small group opposes it and some Council members, the mayor and city attorney oppose it. Six residents opposed it and I have

many more supporters.

“Some just don’t want to see this project happen,” he said.

Henderson said if the project is somehow derailed by the city, several things will end. He listed them as:

- A rainwater containment system on the property sponsored by the Finger Lakes Institute.

- The return of two parcels of land to the tax rolls after more than 20 years off the rolls. “In this economy, the city needs all possible properties on the tax rolls,” he noted.

- The rehabilitation of a blighted part of the city, with the cleanup of a mess of vegetation that served as a dump for years. He noted the large amount of junk taken off the property, including drug paraphernalia.

- The end of a chance to determine if chickens can survive on the land, noting there has been no smells, no wild animals, no lice and no rabies. He said no one would know the hens are there unless they looked hard.

- It ends 50 kilowatts of solar energy, enough to power a dozen homes and businesses in a self-suffi-

cient way. He said the solar panels are not hooked to the grid and the site is not even hooked to city water.

- The involvement of families and children who planned to be involved in the cooperative to learn responsibility, the care of chickens and to share the eggs produced.

- The end of an educational opportunity for 18 families already involved.

“I urge you to keep your word of two years ago. Let this project succeed or fail on its own merits,” he concluded.

Another speaker, Jay Coleman, said he visited the State Street site and agreed with Henderson’s description of the project.

“It looks good. It’s a big improvement, not an eyesore anymore. And it would be on the tax rolls, which is good,” Coleman said.

Ryan Wallace, co-owner of QwikSolar, the local company that would install the solar panels, voiced support for Henderson.

“The city is heading in the right direction, and there are individuals working hard to improve the city with innovative ideas. I urge you to embrace and support them,” Wallace

said. “They are a big part of the rebound of the city. It’s why I came here with my business from Florida.”

Later, 4th Ward Councilor Ken Camera questioned why Council would get involved with the Henderson project.

“Why is it being brought up by some Councilors? The people who oppose it should go through the legal process and file an Article 78,” Camera said.

He said the project received Planning Board approval, and if litigation is filed, the city should defend itself.

Also supporting Henderson was 3rd Ward Councilor Steve Valentino.

At-Large Councilor Tony DiCostanzo said the Planning Board did its “due diligence” with the information it had at the time.

“Is that enough? I’m not sure. Maybe. That’s still to be decided,” he said. “But it’s incumbent on us when an issue is brought before us to look into it.”

“If legal action is threatened against the city, we might want to discuss it first in executive session with legal counsel and then go public if needed,” DiCostanzo added.