

The single most important issue affecting Manchester Township's economic future is the manner and means in which the Heritage Minerals tract is developed. For those who do not know, the Heritage Mineral tract is a 7,000 acre tract of land in Manchester Township that lies southwest of Route 37, continues west to Whiting, and extends from the north boundary of Route 70 all the way to Berkeley Township. The site is roughly the equivalent of twice the size of Pine Lake Park. The land is currently owned by Hovsons Inc., a subsidiary of Hovnanian Enterprises. Currently, Hovsons and the township are exploring the redevelopment options of the land. Since this is such an expansive and potentially important project, I want to keep the residents as informed as possible. The purpose of this article is to provide our residents with the pertinent history, the procedural framework to the development of the land, and create an open dialogue about the vast number of opportunities and concerns with the project.

In 1984, Hovsons purchased the Heritage Mineral Tract which was an abandoned mineral quarry. Approximately 3,000 acres are located in the Pinelands Protection Area (PPA) and 4,000 acres are in the Pinelands/CAFRA overlap area. (*CAFRA is the Coastal Area Facilities Review Act, a division of NJDEP/ land use regulation*). The regulatory distinction is important because the 3,000 acres in PPA cannot be developed while the 4,000 acres in the CAFRA area potentially can be developed. (There are exceptions, wetlands, endangered species habitats, etc.) After purchasing the land, Hovsons sought to develop a "City Within a City" of up to 15,000 residential units. For the next decade, Hovsons, Manchester Township and the DEP were involved in lengthy litigation. Ultimately, in 2004, a settlement was reached between the parties wherein Hovsons could build 2,200 age restricted homes, about 200 affordable housing units and a small amount of commercial development. Importantly, the agreed upon development was to take place on 1,000 acres of disturbed land. Basically, the disturbed land is the land that was actually used in mining operations years ago. Given the housing crisis and the saturation of the senior development market, Hovsons opted not to develop.

In 2014, the Manchester Township Council approved the recommendations of the Planning Board and deemed the 4,000 acre portion in the CAFRA area in need of "Redevelopment." Redevelopment is a legal classification that the land is abandoned and being under-utilized. Towns across the state have used the redevelopment tool to revitalize certain downtrodden areas. The redevelopment classification also carries with it certain land use flexibilities that permit new projects to be created. For instance, in redevelopment areas, the builder and municipality can mutually agree to adhere to the applicable zoning code or not. The town also has the ability to provide various tax benefits for the new developments.

The next step in the process is for Manchester Township and Hovsons to create a Redevelopment Plan that basically sets the blueprint for the development. The blueprint will establish

the number of residential units, the type of units, the commercial units, infrastructure, utilities, schools, etc.

In order to prepare the Redevelopment Plan, I selected the “Heritage Working Group” to help in formulating the plan. The Heritage Working Group consists of the following individuals both from our town government and residents: Donna Markulic, Business Administrator; Councilman Wallis, Councilman Vaccaro and Councilman Fusaro (only two councilmen will attend each working group meeting); Police Chief Lisa Parker; Al Yodakis, Director of Public Works; Donald Somerset, Director of Utilities; Superintendent of Schools David Trethaway; Felicia Finn, Whiting resident, Zoning Board of Adjustment member and local real estate broker/agent; Michelle Zolezi, Manchester resident, Planning Board member with an environmental degree and work history; and Blanche Doran, Whiting resident, Senior Advisory Committee member and Manchester Coordinating Council member. Additionally, our Town Planner David Roberts of Maser Consulting and I are co-chairing the group.

The “redevelopment plan” process can be lengthy. I will make it a point to keep you as informed as possible. We will hold public sessions to answer questions, take suggestions and hear concerns along the way. Please note, the professional services utilized by the township are paid for by Hovsons, which is customary. Aside from the time of our employees, exploring the possibilities will not cost the town. The risk is on Hovsons as they are footing the bill. Assuming a redevelopment plan and agreement are entered into, this project still has a number of obstacles. First, the Redevelopment Plan is to be reviewed by our Planning Board and then ultimately approved by the Town Council. Then the plan would have to be approved by the state DEP and CAFRA. Realistically, we are years away from a shovel hitting the ground, but it’s a start.

I personally view this project as an opportunity to shape the future of Manchester Township in an incredibly positive and fiscally responsible way. I view our relationship with Hovsons as a partnership. Like any partnership, we have mutual goals that serve our individual needs. My philosophy is simple -- the project must make financial sense for Manchester and be environmentally responsible.

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REMINDER: There is “No Trespassing” permitted on the Heritage Minerals Site. Manchester Police Department will strictly enforce township ordinances and fines.

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