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Still No Sale

Dr. Christopher Gobler's analysis of the final environmental impact statement for The Hills at Southampton, released on Monday, concludes that a series of new concessions have ever so slightly tipped the scales in its favor. The highly anticipated report says that when development offsets and other sweeteners are considered, the luxury golf resort community planned by Discovery Land Company of Arizona on nearly 600 acres in East Quogue will generate the least amount of polluting nitrogen compared to other alternatives.

The question that remains: Is that enough to earn final approval for Discovery, which will enjoy a substantial financial windfall if the Southampton Town Board allows the developer to ignore preexisting zoning and pursue its planned development district, the last ever granted by the town?

The answer is no.

Dr. Gobler's report can be viewed as validation: Discovery finally got over what appeared to be a significant hurdle, putting its proposal up against other options and showing lower nitrogen numbers—no small feat. But a closer examination of the report reveals reluctant validation, one that is fraught with potential issues and laden with warnings.

He notes that the updated document incorporates five new proposals, including more preserved land, the purchase and retirement of 30 Pine Barrens credits, and a sewage treatment plant serving both the resort and the nearby elementary school. All are excellent additions.

At the same time, Dr. Gobler stresses that there are many uncertainties that could alter his calculations. Some are uncontrollable factors, like the number of homeowners who might, or might not, take advantage of a \$1 million fund set up by Discovery to encourage the installation of new cutting-edge septic systems on nearby properties. Others are controllable but variable: Will the golf course end up using more fertilizers than projected? Dr. Gobler warns that the town would be responsible for "stringent enforcement" and "careful monitoring" of The Hills property if it ultimately approves the zone change, to guarantee that the developer is keeping its word. There's an implication here: It might not.

Discovery officials are viewing Dr. Gobler's report as confirmation that the most intense proposal is the best option on the table. But, so far, the table has included only interpretations of "as of right" development and has mostly left off realistic reduced-density alternatives that the town could mandate. Developers never offer lower-impact alternatives that are more appealing than their actual applications—that's not unusual. But that reluctance prompted the Group for the East End to pitch its own plan, blending housing with an equestrian-based use that actually takes into account preexisting limitations and clustering requirements. It's not meant to be a blueprint—just to clearly demonstrate that there are other options for reasonable development of the site.

Ultimately, it matters only if the Town Board—and, specifically, Supervisor Jay Schneiderman, who likely will bring some votes with him—believes Discovery has won the fight in this latest round. But this is hardly a knockout. Discovery cleared the hurdle, but by the slightest of margins, and only because it sweetened the pot significantly.

It's important to remember the stakes: This is the largest tract of land left on the South Fork to be developed. It's in an environmentally sensitive location. The difference between the profits to be made through as-of-right zoning, versus the use allowed by a PDD, is not just significant, it's mammoth.

There clearly are benefits for the community, and now a stamp of approval that its potential for pollution is slightly lower. Does it really justify a vote to erase the zoning restrictions altogether?

For such a change of zone, one that would forever alter the hamlet's landscape with an unprecedented project, The Hills needed to do better than simply being the slightly better option: It needs to blow away any other proposal. As it stands, it's a perfectly good project—still just not good enough.

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