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"Motives in Oswegatchie Hills"

Environment, not social justice, is what's threatened by high-density development proposal

Landmark LLC has done a superb job at clouding motives in its plan to build hundreds of units of waterfront housing in the Oswegatchie Hills section of East Lyme.

The worst example is its attempt to pass itself off as champion of social justice. When a member of the Zoning Commission asked Glenn Russo, the principal in the company, why the firm didn't merely build single-family houses, which would conform to the existing zoning, he explained that various parts of the state needed affordable housing.

It looks more to us as though the firm could make a lot more money on the hundreds of units sold at market rates rather than dozens of single family houses on three-acre lots. One of the values of the state's affordable housing law is the leverage it gives developers to alter zoning to increase the density in scarce waterfront areas. To this end, the firm has brought in the state NAACP to help make its case that East Lyme's motives in opposing his plans have been to keep minorities from living in East Lyme by standing in the way of affordable housing.

A lawyer for the NAACP pointed out at a hearing last week that other towns have used the argument that they can't sewer areas to turn down affordable housing proposals.

There is much more history and many more reasons why East Lyme, Waterford, the state of Connecticut and this newspaper have opposed building in the Oswegatchie Hills and none of them have had to do with affordable housing. The effort has been underway at least since 1975.

The land is on one of the last large stretches of pristine waterfront land in Connecticut. It strains the runoff water that flows into the Niantic River, serving as a filter for this valuable ecosystem. It is unspoiled beauty, which is precisely why Mr. Russo wants to build high density housing there -- and precisely why there is such vociferous opposition to his plans.

It has nothing to do with social justice and affordable housing.