

Blue Heron Pines housing plan dead, may be reborn as grassland habitat

MICHELLE BRUNETTI POST Staff Writer

GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — A long-stalled plan to develop Blue Heron Pines East into a community of almost 1,000 houses is dead, as owner Ole Hansen and Son has told the state Pinelands Commission it is giving up its approvals for the project.

At the same time, the South Jersey Transportation Authority wants to stop maintaining a 290-acre grassland it has managed for 15 years at the airport as habitat for the state-threatened grasslands sparrow and state-endangered upland sandpiper, citing safety concerns.

And it may be looking at Blue Heron Pines, a former golf course, as an alternate site.

“We are actively marketing this property, and we did provide real estate market information about our property to the SJTA at their request, but have not received any purchase offers,” said Ole Hansen President and CEO David Goddard.

Buildings at Blue Heron Pines East have been renovated to accommodate Enlightened Solutions, an addiction treatment center, and “will be there into the foreseeable future,” said Goddard. Enlightened Solutions is run by Jennifer Hansen, who is also the director of real estate development for the family company.

The SJTA has applied to the Pinelands Commission for permission to change a 2004 agreement that allowed it to develop parts of the airport in exchange for creating the grasslands.

The SJTA declined to comment on the application.

“Since this matter is an active negotiation between (the authority and the commission), the SJTA cannot comment on specific details at this time,” spokesman Mark Amorosi said.

The authority may have to purchase about 300 acres of replacement land for an estimated \$3 million or more as alternative habitat, according to commission estimates.

The 368-acre Blue Heron Pines East on Tilton Road near Atlantic City International Airport in Egg Harbor Township earned commission approvals for 944 units of housing in 2009, said Goddard.

That was just after the national recession, when the local housing market plummeted. There still isn't strong enough demand in the region to go forward with the project, said Goddard.

The authority submitted letters and reports to the commission from the Air Force Safety Center, the Department of Agriculture and a consultant called Environmental Resource Solutions supporting the change.

“Airfields are artificially maintained environments designed for the safe launch and recovery of aircraft and must not be used as a wildlife conservation easement,” according to the Air Force letter. “Both the Upland

Sandpiper and Grasshopper Sparrow may serve as food attractants for raptor species and the vegetation maintained for these species may well increase the number of insects and small mammals that may attract both avian and terrestrial predators to the airfield.”

The SJTA is asking for a decision before April 15, when the prohibition on mowing comes into effect under its 2004 memorandum of agreement with the commission. The agreement does not allow mowing from April 15 through Aug. 15 of each year.

New Jersey Audubon, which helped establish the grasslands at the airport years ago, said mowing the area does not increase safety, since shorter grass will only attract larger, more problematic birds like geese and gulls.

Under the current draft of the amendment, the SJTA would place \$500,000 in escrow with the commission until it can identify other measures to compensate for the loss of the grassland area, said commission Executive Director Nancy Wittenberg.

“SJTA time frames are super tight for our process,” she said at the March 8 commission meeting.

A public hearing will be held 10 a.m. Tuesday at the commission’s offices in Pemberton Township, and written comments must be sent to the Commission no later than that date, said spokesman Paul Leakan.

Wittenberg said the commission is looking at several options.

“It may take us a while to find the right land, find it and take care of all this against safety concerns at the airport,” said Wittenberg. “At the end of the day, we replace habitat one way or another.”

New Jersey Audubon Executive Director Eric Stiles called the SJTA proposal “a step in the wrong direction” and offered to help the airport come up with a new plan.

“This is one of the last places for upland sandpiper,” said Stiles. “It is essential habitat.”

The threatened frosted elfin butterfly is also found there, said Stiles.

The proposed amendment says no commission approvals will be issued for any pending or future Pinelands development applications for the airport until measures are taken to offset the loss of the grasslands protection.