The Chairman called the meeting to order and stated it was being held in compliance with the “Open Public Meeting Act” and had been duly noticed and published as required by law.

ROLL CALL

Present: Mr. Brocco, Mr. Cohen, Mr. Daddario, Mr. Fanelli, Mr. Leoncio, Mr. Senges,

Mr. Schwenke, Mr. Weil, Mr. Willard

Absent: Mr. Cupersmith

Also, present, Stuart Platt, Board Solicitor, Ben Matlack, CME, Board Engineer, Chris Dochney, CME, Planner, and Corrine Tarcelli, Zoning Board Secretary

**RESOLUTIONS FOR APPROVAL**

Mr. Weil motioned to approve Resolution for Case #ZC2018-024, George Zugaib c/o Salon Zu’Gaib presented before the Board on January 24, 2019; seconded by Mr. Willard; none (0) against, Mr. Brocco, Mr. Senges, Mr. Fanelli abstained.

**OLD BUSINESS**

**The Chakrabarti Foundation**

111 Centennial Blvd.

Block 200, Lot 10.03

Case #ZC2018-018

Mr. Platt summarized the case for the Chakrabarti Foundation. The Chakrabarti Foundation is seeking a use variance relief from Section 152.142 of the ULDO to allow an ‘Ashram’ with 20 efficiency age-restricted residential units with a large welcome/community center in an Economic Industrial Business (EIB) zone; seeking relief from Section 152.145(H)(2) to permit parking setbacks of 35 feet to right of way where 50 feet is required; and 25 feet to the property line where 50 feet is required; and from Section 150.16(A) a de minimis exception is requested from the Residential Site Improvement Standards if more than 0.8 parking spaces per unit as provided are required. Also seeking any and all other variances, waivers, and/or other relief as may be deemed necessary by the Board and/or its professionals. This meeting was continued from the previous meeting which took place February 14, 2019.

Mr. Baron appearing on behalf of Centennial Mills Association is objecting to the variance. Mr. Baron stated Mr. Rahenkamp, Professional Planner on behalf of the Centennial Mills Association, was scheduled to testify this evening and confirmed at the last meeting that he would be in attendance. However, Mr. Rahenkamp contacted Mr. Baron Tuesday evening, March 12, 2019 and stated he was obligated to appear in Morris County. Therefore, Mr. Rahenkamp will not be able to testify. Mr. Baron indicated that it was inconsistent with his understanding of what they agreed to. Mr. Baron further stated late Wednesday, March 13, 2019 the planner informed him that he would be able to appear. However, Mr. Baron and Mr. Cofsky discussed it and they agreed it would be difficult to prepare on such short notice and agreed that the public portion could proceed at this meeting and the planner will be able to attend April 11, 2019. Mr. Cofsky stated he agreed.

Mr. Platt stated the meeting will be continued through the month of April and requested the Action date be extended until the end of April. Mr. Cofsky agreed and stated he will submit a written letter requesting same.

Mr. Senges stated the Board has granted a number of postponements and extensions. In the 12 years he has been a member of the Board he has never had a planner state that he was not available. It is a burden on the public and a burden on the Applicant. Mr. Senges further stated it is nice that everyone agreed and the Board wants to provide everyone an opportunity to share their voice. He further stated should this planner once again default, the Board will not grant another extension.

Mr. Baron stated that in the event the planner will not be able to attend on April 11, 2019, he has another planner scheduled.

Mr. Platt instructed the Board that the fact that the objector’s planner, not once, now twice could not be here cannot be used against him. It should not be used as an issue of credibility. The HOA’s planner is not available tonight and will be available on April 11. Therefore, this application will continue beyond today’s date so the Board will have an opportunity to hear from everyone, the public included. He stated this evening the Board will hear from the public. Anyone that would like to speak tonight will be given the opportunity to voice their opinion. Mr. Platt further stated this Board is a separate and independent body from the Mayor and Township Committee. This is similar to a municipal court. It is a separate body. Everyone is a volunteer and lives in this Township. No matter what this Board decides it has absolutely nothing to do with the Mayor and the other members of the Township Committee. By law the Zoning Board is politically independent from the governing body. The governing body cannot get involved in the process or the application. Therefore whatever decision the Board makes, it has absolutely nothing to do with the Mayor or the other members of the Township Committee. If the perception is otherwise, that is not the reality.

Mr. Senges echoed what Mr. Platt stated and further stated the Zoning Board is clearly politically independent. He stated this Board prides themselves in being independent, professional, listening to the evidence understanding the legalities of the evidence and makes a ruling truly based on the evidence. The decision will be rendered independently by each individual. He stated there will be another meeting scheduled after this evening and therefore, would like to limit this evening to approximately one hour. With that being said the Board is going to be strict about the five minute rule. It is very important that testimony provided this evening be relevant to the application and to the testimony that has been heard thus far.

Mr. Senges opened the hearing to the public.

Mr. Richard Castro, 84 Matlack Drive, Centennial Mills was sworn in to testify. Mr. Castro stated he is of the opinion that Mr. Chakrabarti is making assumptions about everything he proposes. He assumes the Ashram will create world peace. He assumes the property will be kept clean and well maintained. He assumes the Ashram will be successful and the foundation will pay for the upkeep of the Ashram. However, we do not know how long. We only know some of Mr. Chakrabarti’s assumptions. Mr. Castro stated he assumes the ashram will not enhance the value of Voorhees, Centennial Mills or the surrounding community. Mr. Castro assumes the property will not be properly maintained. He assumes people from other cultures UK, England, Japan and India will reside in the townhomes and they will drive on the other side of the road and will create traffic problems. He also assumes this project will not be successful and the property will fall in disrepair. An Ashram should be in a secluded or wooded setting not in the front yard of a 55 and over retirement community. There is plenty of rural and secluded land in South Jersey that would serve Dr. Chakrabarti’s mission. Mr. Castro further stated the United Nations and League of Nations for over 99 years has tried to accomplish world peace and is not able to do so. He requested the Board not change the zoning of this property to address one man’s vision to the detriment of hundreds of residents.

Dr. Richard Greene, 54 Alyce Lane, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. He stated he agreed with several things Mr. Baron stated. He opposes the Ashram proposed by Dr. Chakrabarti. He voiced his concerns about the safety as have the residents of Centennial Mills. Although the site may be fenced in on three sides, this does not prevent the residents of the Ashram from walking or driving through the Centennial Mills neighborhood. Centennial Mills is an age-restricted community. The residents have the right to feel safe especially in the evening hours. Safety is one of the reasons why many of the residents have purchased in Centennial Mills. He has not heard any testimony about the security measures at the Ashram or anything relative to security procedures or any plans of that nature. Dr. Chakrabarti indicated the library would be open to the public during certain hours. Once again there is potential for outside individuals to walk through the community. He further stated he believes there are a large number of other locations that would be better suited for an Ashram.

Mrs. Joanne Greene, 54 Alyce Lane, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. She wanted to state for the record that she opposes the application.

Dr. Francis Lettieri, 26 Milford Circle, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. He has resided in Voorhees for ten years. He has attended every meeting and has listened very closely to the statements, testimonies, etc. He has been unable to discern any benefits to the Centennial Mills residents or any Voorhees residents. The Ashram will directly impact the community. Dr. Chakrabarti has an admirable idea, however, this site is truly an unsuitable location for his proposal. Mr. Lettieri further stated he does not see anything that would indicate this would be beneficial. There will be disruptions, inconveniences and disturbances to the residents. It is not fair to the residents and there are other available sites. The residents live here, they know what the traffic patterns are, what the congestion is. This proposal has the potential to wreak havoc on a well-established, well-maintained retirement community. There are too many inconsistencies, contradictions, fake promises and assumptions for this to be a viable usage for this site. The Centennial Mills residents are opposed to the Ashram. There are no known benefits to our community. If zoning prohibits residential use and educational or a combination of both, why would the Board possibly consider it? There is no logical reason to accept this plan and change the zoning. A shopping retail center will be inherently beneficial to our community. Even if the site became a transitional care facility for the Centennial Mills residents who do not want to move outside of the community, that would be a much more viable usage and directly beneficial to the Centennial Mills residents. Dr. Chakrabarti would like to promote world peace and harmony however in contrary to his mission, he has created discord and disharmony among the residents of Centennial Mills that has resulted in a contentious dispute. He requested Dr. Chakrabarti please find another viable and suitable location that would be much more conducive to his mission.

Mr. Allan Pepper, 3 Lumbermill Lane, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. He stated he agrees with the objections stated by Mr. Baron. He too would like to express his concern over the location of the Ashram. The existence of the Ashram directly adjacent to the Centennial Mills community would create a significant safety and security concern to the residents of this community. The purpose of the Ashram as stated by the Applicant is to promote world peace, harmonize different cultures and religions. Hate crimes are at a very high and dangerous point at this time. He stated there has been a substantial rise in hate crimes in this country. As evidenced by many publicized incidents. Most recently by the Pittsburgh synagogue shootings. Ethnic hate crimes has jumped by 18% in 2017 to 4,131 incidents according to the FBI as reported in many articles and the national media. He stated he has a copy of these findings recently published by the Wall Street Journal. The studies stated that hate and extremism has now risen to the highest level in a decade. It was also reported by the same study center that many factors play a role in hate crimes. The ashram will need to consider security measures and security personnel on-site due to the potential for attacks. This is becoming common and recommended practice for such facilities. The proximity of the Ashram immediately adjacent to a peaceful residential community unfortunately will most certainly increase the security and safety concerns of the residents of Centennial Mills its mere existence and what is happening in the world today. Ashrams are typically situated away from areas of high population and other urban distractions as defined by the many standard definitions of Ashram. It is for this reason and the inherent danger that the placement of an Ashram adjacent to Centennial Mills be rejected.

Mr. Louis Cosenza, 106 Borton Avenue, Centennial Mills, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. He stated he has been a resident of Voorhees Township for 44 years. He loves Voorhees Township. He raised his two daughters in Voorhees who now both live in Voorhees and they love it. He stated he has a very big concern. It is simply that Centennial Mills has a wonderful tight knit community, well-maintained. This location will become the new face of Centennial Mill. He stated that he doesn’t mean to state a threat but if the Board approves the application, he will be one of the first residents to place his home up for sale and he’s afraid the whole thing will spiral downhill and the residents would lose the value of their homes and their beautiful community.

Mr. Steven Pecker, 45 Alyce Lane, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. The residents of Centennial Mills contribute their free time and dedicated efforts to keep the community as tightly knit as it can possibly be. He stated security is certainly a concern. He does not want to repeat what has been said already. There are other organizations in Cherry Hill where they do need to have security all during the day to be sure that these other factors do not hurt the citizens. The dedication the residents of Centennial Mills show the Board by being at the meetings night after night is not just superficial, it’s deep. He honestly believes this is a good cause and he respects that. However, there is no reason why it should be forced into the front yard of Centennial Mills in a tight area where concessions will have to be made to make it fit. There are other alternatives and he would like to have those examined.

Mrs. Gail Freeman, 27 Milford Circle, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. Mrs. Freeman stated she agrees with the objections that were raised by Mr. Baron. She has listened to the testimony and understand that residential use is not permitted on this property. Why would the Zoning Board approve a use that is specifically prohibited by the Township? Her understanding is that the Zoning Board merely considers and enforces the zoning that is in place. She recognizes there are instances where certain uses might be appropriate but not an Ashram within a few hundred feet of a multi-family age-restricted development. She urged the Board to enforce the zoning as it currently exists. If it leads to some other use variance so be it. She requested the Board to please protect the zoning for hundreds of residents of Centennial Mills. She further stated her and her husband moved here from Philadelphia because there were five attempts to break into their home. The fifth time they were successful and there was someone in the home at that time. They moved to Centennial Mills because it is a gated and safe place.

Mrs. Mary Peterman, 11 Hoffman Street, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. Mrs. Peterman stated she agreed with the objections raised by Mr. Baron.

Mr. Baron suggested that he would like to see by a show of hands how many individuals oppose the application. Mr. Platt stated he would normally disagree. Mr. Cofsky did not have any objections. Mr. Platt stated this is not done to prevent anyone from testifying. Mr. Senges stated anyone who takes objection to the application, please raise their hands. He further stated those in attendance who are in favor, please raise their hands. Mr. Platt stated let the record reflect that we have over 100 people in the room and the overwhelming majority raised their hands in opposition to the application and there are about 10-15 people who raised their hands in favor of the application. Mr. Platt stated he felt as though that is an unfair assessment.

Mr. Senges stated there seems to be the belief that the job of the Zoning Board is to rule and to enforce the zoning regulations. In reality we are called the Zoning Board of Adjustment. We realize zoning ordinances sometimes need to be adjusted. That’s why we are the Zoning Board of Adjustment. A couple of individuals mentioned that the Board was going to change the zoning. We do not have the power to change the zoning. However, what the Board does when the Board sees an appropriate need and the testimony supports the need to make an adjustment, then the Board will make an adjustment. The applicant is requesting the Board to give them approval to have a use that would not otherwise be covered in the zoning ordinance. We are tasked with the responsibility of making a decision and providing a ruling when the testimony supports it to allow something that would not otherwise be allowed. For a use variance, we the Board will need five out of seven affirmative votes. That in and of itself signifies how important not only the law is and how important this Board and this township takes that responsibility when it comes to a use variance. Your voices are being heard. We have to do our job based on the testimony and the law.

Mr. Rakesh Guppa, Medford, NJ was sworn in to testify. Mr. Platt stated Mr. Guppa can testify however, his testimony will not have half of much weight than the people that live in Voorhees or Centennial Mills. Mr. Guppa is a physician in Voorhees and does do a lot of work in Voorhees. He attended all of the meetings. He stated he felt as though there are a lot of unfounded irrational fears and ideas about people coming here from other countries. These are learned educated scholars. They are not hear to traipse on the properties at Centennial Mills. Dr. Chakrabarti is investing $7,000,000 without any financial reward to himself or his family. He is doing it for social change. There is not a business plan. He has a vision. He has proven that with his immense success in the business he conducts. It is a process, it is an evolution. This will keep evolving for betterment. He requested the Board to please grant the application. He is the secretary of the Indian Cultural Center and supports the application. He does not have any relationship or connection with Dr. Chakrabarti.

Mrs. Sangeeta Rashatwar, 488 Kresson Road, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. She stated she has been a resident in Voorhees since 1986. Her and her husband moved to Mantua, New Jersey. In 1994 they moved back to Voorhees. Voorhees is an excellent place to live. My son plays football, her daughter played soccer. She was on the counsel for Eastern High School. She volunteers her time also for Prom night at the school and it’s a wonderful opportunity for the kids to be at a non-alcoholic party. Her and her husband has a business in Cherry Hill and that office supports the Eastern Foundation. She further stated she is a professional business woman, computer scientist by trade. She stated she loves Voorhees because of the diversity and the people and everything the township has to offer as far as education. She is also a member of the Indian Cultural Center. She is a Board Member and has been serving for three years. She is also a member of the Hindu American Foundation, Hindu advocacy group and recently their temple was vandalized in Ohio. She feels as though individuals cannot stand at the sidelines and watch good people be victimized because of the color of their skin and that they’re not American. She stated she contributes to society and pays taxes. She believes this project will bring a voice a think tank something that we are really in need of. She’s heard testimony that people are going to come from different parts from the world and drive on different sides of the roads. We as tourists go to the UK and we go to Europe and we drive. Could we have accidents? Of course. Everything she has heard is based on a lot of assumptions; that the Ashram could become targets of terrorism. In this case there is an unfounded fear that the Ashram is going to be a target of terrorism. Do I think it is going to pose a threat to Centennial Mills Residents? “No”. She feels as though individuals need to take a chance and that’s why she feels the Zoning Board should approve the application. The property has been vacant for many years. This is in a business zone and there can be a business there. An Ashram is going to provide a tranquil setting. There are shopping districts very close so even if a strip center were to be built she doesn’t feel as though it would be viable. There are a lot of strip centers on 561 that are closed. The businesses should be made viable on 561. She further stated she supports the zoning change for this application, for a residential peaceful setting.

Mr. Ray Gunther, 107 Borton Avenue, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. Mr. Gunther is the President of the Homeowner’s Association and has been for the past five years. He has been a resident for 15 years. He stated Centennial Mills supports the foundation for the Eastern High School foundation. They also support PGAA and has donated money to the police every year. Although they do not have any children in the school they support Voorhees 100%. There are Indian residents that live in Centennial Mills whom they love and adore. There is no prejudice in the room by anybody. The residents of Centennial Mills are one of the nicest, loveliest group of people. The residents know all the Officials. The Officials come to my son’s memorial dinner. They support us as we support them. He stated he feels as though Centennial Mills is really a part of this community. He further stated he agreed with Mr. Baron.

Mr. Jim Bimbroiaco, 72 Matlack Drive, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. Mr. Bimbroiaco stated that he and his wife moved to Voorhees three years ago from Hunderton County. They love living in Centennial Mills. It is a terrific community and they care very much about the community. It’s populated with many wonderful and friendly people and they have made some terrific friendships. It is an active adult community, regularly hosting community dinners and events and promoting more recreational opportunities that he could ever take advantage of. He loves hearing the high school band behind them on evenings during the spring, summer and fall playing music. He also enjoys seeing all the high school students walk through the community on their way to and from school almost every day. It’s nice to see them in our community; strangers in their community. Simply put Centennial Mills is a great place to live and they are very fortunate. To spite my deep respect for my friends and neighbors who have a different point of view as a matter of principal and good conscience, he cannot bring himself to oppose this application. To the contrary he supports it. He urged the Board to approve the application with whatever reasonable conditions they determine to be appropriate. He further stated in the spirit of full disclosure, he wanted the Board to know that he is employed by the company that was founded by Dr. Chakrabarti for which he is the chairman. However, he is appearing as a resident of Centennial Mills in Voorhees Township and has not been asked directly or indirectly by Dr. Chakrabarti to speak on behalf of the application. He would take the same position regardless of whether or not he was employed by Dr. Chakrabarti. Given the current state of affairs the Ashram represents an incredibly timely vision for the sole purpose of bringing together under one roof 20, only 20 scholars. Scholars in age-restricted efficiency units with a welcome and community center from around the world with the sole vision of promoting world peace. The application speaks in terms of an Ashram. It has been testified that what is really being discussed is a ‘think tank’. A think tank with 20 senior resident scholars. A group of people that come together to do nothing more but to read, discuss, think, and write usually to address or redress a matter of vital importance to humanity. One can think of a think tank as a research university with the absence of students. All they are and will be expected to do is research, research, and more research. Think about the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. These are all think tanks. Think about the prestige to our community if one of these think tanks wanted to settle in Voorhees. Why would anyone want to oppose such a use? Well it is obvious there is opposition from a great number of Centennial Mill’s residents, there are also a good number of members of Centennial Mill’s residents who see the benefits but are reluctant to come forward.

Mr. Platt stated unless Mr. Bimbroiaco has evidence of that statement, the statement is ruled as hearsay.

Mr. Bimbroiaco further stated the project just like Centennial Mills is in the EIB zone with a CCRC overlay. Could it be seriously argued that a commercial wholesale facility, testing laboratory, vehicle repair facility, bulk laundry processing center or an auction house at this site are superior to that of the proposed use? Can it be seriously doubted that the proposed residential think tank is in fact more compatible with the existing neighborhood characteristics than any other of the permitted uses? The 2012 Master Plan Re-examination report of Voorhees Township states that one of the objectives of the Master Plan is to encourage the development of vacant properties and to promote the protection of the neighborhood characteristics. That’s exactly what this application would do. He further stated that the primary neighborhood characteristics here are residential senior housing. Just like the CCRC overlay, the application is for a small residential community of 20 scholars over the age of 55 and entirely consistent with and not at all in conflict with both the spirit and the intent of the EIB zone and the overlay. As Mr. Bimbroiaco understands it, if this were an application for a CCRC, the applicant would require limited if any bulk variances. To be clear this is not an affordable housing project. He urged the Board to approve it to spite the pressures the Board may feel and as he often felt when he stood in their shoes. Mr. Bimbroiaco has strong memories of members of his former community shaking their fist at him and other members of his Board when they voted in favor for an unpopular application. To spite that and as the law demands, the Board limited their considerations to the evidence only and not public emotion. After the unpopular was approved and constructed, many of those who opposed it actually said they were wrong because after all the project ultimately fit. This is an inspired well impact use of this site. Mr. Bimbroiaco again urged the Board to approve the application.

Mr. Steven Wenick, 37 Milford Circle, Voorhees was sworn in to testify. Mr. Wenick stated he does not fear people of a different color, different ethnic background, and different religious backgrounds. However, he does have objections to the Ashram’s location for two reasons. It will change the character of Centennial Mills. Centennial Mills is a stable community, over 55. The Ashram is not a stable community. It’s a five year cycle. People are transient. They do not have a vested interest in the community, the township and the institutions, like the residents of Centennial Mills. Because of this it will change the character of the neighborhood. The second one is age. We keep hearing it is over a 55 community. They do have conferences, they do have visitors, and they do have a library that is open to the public, not restricted by age so there will not be this consistent over 55 presence that the residents currently have. Mr. Wenick implored the Board not to improve the application.

Mr. Subash Rashatwar, 488 Kresson Road, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. Mr. Platt stated Mr. Rashatwar is a member of the Voorhees Planning Board. Mr. Rashatwar stated he is a member of the Planning Board and Environmental Commission Board for the past eight years. He has been a Voorhees resident for the past 25 years. He has not been retained by Dr. Chakrabarti. He feels this project is good for the community. It will bring peace and harmony to the local and national level. We are all part of one humanity. This project will bring many philosophers, people with different specialties, and moral values and he believes the world really needs it at this point. This will place Voorhees Township on the world map.

Mr. Robert Goatz, 88 Matlack Drive, Voorhees, NJ was sworn in to testify. Mr. Goatz stated there are 401 homes in Centennial Mills with a total population very close to 700 people. He further stated the age level within the Centennial Mills is not 55 years of age. The community itself is now 15 years of age. A lot of individuals moved there 15 years ago, therefore, most of the residents are now in their 70s and 80s. There was a petition that was sent out several months ago. They obtained 312 signatures of the 401 homes opposing the project. Unfortunately, there are only 100-120 people that attend the hearing because that’s what the room holds.

Mr. Senges stated the Board does not legally react to emotion or sentiment but simply on testimony. It is the law the Board is obligated and required to follow. He further stated the Board always hear from the public and a lot of the time the public makes some very valid points that the Board takes into consideration.

Mr. Sailesh Chowdhury, 551 Bartium Road, Moorestown, NJ was sworn in to testify. Mr. Platt stated Mr. Chowdhury will not have the same impact as individuals that live within the town. Mr. Chowdhury is the Chairman of the Board of the Indian Cultural Center that serves the community and many of his employees live in Voorhees. Mr. Chowdhury continued to speak about individuals of Indian origin. Mr. Platt suggested he must speak directly to the application and speaking about a certain nationality is not appropriate. Mr. Chowdhury stated the Ashram is a concept taking shape and quoted “I think, therefore I am. I am that’s why we think”. Mr. Chowdhury further stated he knows the applicant and supports the application.

Seeing no one further from the public. The public portion was closed.

Mr. Senges thanked everyone for their input. Mr. Platt requested Mr. Cofsky extend the action date until the End of April. Mr. Cofsky stated he would issue a letter requesting same.

Mr. Platt stated the Board will motion to continue the application to April 11, 2019, 7 p.m. No further notice will be required.

Mr. Weil made a motion to continue the meeting to April 11, 2019; seconded by Mr. Willard.

Ayes: Mr. Cohen, Mr. Daddario, Mr. Weil, Mr. Willard, Mr. Leoncio, Mr. Brocco, Mr. Schwenke, Mr. Fanelli, and Mr. Senges.

Nays: None

Seeing no further business Mr. Senges made a motion to adjourn, seconded by Mr. Weil.

Meeting was adjourned.

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Corrine Tarcelli

Zoning Board Secretary