

Petition for 'horse-friendly' Bedford

By JESS FASANO

"Where have all the horses gone?" This question led an ad hoc group of horse owners to come together over the last year to address concerns that the Town of Bedford is losing members of its equestrian community to neighboring towns deemed more "horse-friendly."

The group has since dubbed themselves Bedford Loves Horses and recently petitioned town officials to re-evaluate some of its laws concerning horse ownership.

BLH member Christy Counts argued at Tuesday's Bedford Town Board meeting that the town's "overly restrictive" ordinances affecting the viability of barns pose a particular obstacle for horse owners.

Ms. Counts, who moved to Bedford from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, with her family approximately four years ago, stated she was "smitten" with the town's horse community, backyard barns and trail system. After purchasing 8 acres on Bayberry Lane with property on the trails, Ms. Counts said her family set out to invest in a home renovation, which included building a barn.

"Pretty quickly I realized that Bedford was not quite necessarily the horse-friendly community that I had been looking for," she said.

According to Ms. Counts, her family ran into "some pretty major problems" while trying to put a single bathroom in their barn. As she is a full-time working mother of three, Ms. Counts said barn help is required, making it necessary to have a bathroom in the barn for the use of staff.

Ms. Counts said the culprit for her difficulties installing a bathroom in the barn was the "accessory structure" provision in the town code. According to the code, bathrooms are currently prohibited in barns, but are permissible in other types of accessory structures, such as those characterized as cottages.

Over the summer Bedford's planning board began discussions on possibly amending the town's regulation of bathrooms in accessory structures.

Ms. Counts noted her disillusionment went beyond the barn. She said that her family continued to run into problems clearing land for pasture, and that she began to notice the horse trails were always empty whenever she went out for rides.

According to Ms. Counts, it's only a matter of time before Bedford loses its equestrian estates, and, with them, some of its character.

According to fellow BLH member Sally Slater, a longtime Bedford resident, lifelong horse rider and local realtor, the current state of Bedford's equestrian community does not bode well for property values. Ms. Slater, who owned a horse farm in town for many years herself, noted horse properties



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Horse property owners are petitioning officials to modify sections of the town code.

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for sale in Bedford now typically sit on the market for long periods of time. She said at Tuesday's town board meeting that some of these properties are taking years to sell, even at reduced prices.

Ms. Slater explained that when she moved to Bedford nearly 35 years ago, "horse farms dotted the roads, there was a trail system and people walked around town in riding boots feeling right at home." Now, she said, more and more horse owners are relocating to North Salem.

In an interview earlier this week, BLH member Nancy Nygreen explained that with its recent petition, the group is asking the town board to endorse its point of view and work toward amending planning and zoning policies so that they are more supportive of Bedford's equine community.

"We feel keeping Bedford, Bedford, means keeping horses [here]," she said.

Ms. Counts said BLH plans to play a more active role in the community, working with the Bedford Riding Lanes Association, to promote Bedford as a proponent of an equestrian lifestyle. Ms. Counts also suggested to the town board that BLH could form an advisory committee of equine experts to help the

board review town ordinances related to horse ownership for practicality and relevance.

The BLH petition has been supported by a number of town officials. Town Historian John Stockbridge, who attended Tuesday's town board meeting, noted that Bedford's equine character has been a defining element of its past. He added that farms, barns and stables continue to be important components of the town.

Town Supervisor Chris Burdick said at the board meeting that members of Bedford's horse community had first approached him two years ago regarding issues related to the town's support of its horse owners. The supervisor said he "wholeheartedly" agreed that equestrian activities and horse ownership are integral parts of Bedford. He explained it is "really distressing" to here from community members about the lack of riders on the trails and relocation of horse owners.

"I'm hoping that we haven't lost something that's precious to our community," Mr. Burdick said.

Speaking on behalf of his colleagues, Mr. Burdick said the town board supports the efforts of BLH.

Deputy Town Supervisor Lee Roberts echoed that she believes horses are "an intrinsic" part of Bedford and its history. Ms. Roberts said she was "somewhat taken aback" by the scope of the issues expressed by BLH and is looking forward to coming up with recommendations that could be made to keep horse owners in Bedford.

Town board member Don Scott, who was raised around horses in Kentucky, said he is familiar with the concerns of the equestrian community, particularly those concerning accessory structures. Mr. Scott suggested looking at North Salem's town code, as many have deemed the municipality's policies to be more horse-friendly than Bedford's. He said Bedford needs to let others know that it is "the best place in Westchester to have a horse."

Fellow board member MaryAnn Carr explained she also grew up with horses and has an affinity for them. Ms. Carr thanked BLH for bringing the issues they have noted to the board's attention and said the town board would work with the group and the town's planning board to discuss solutions.

Mr. Burdick stated the BLH petition would be referred to the planning board, accompanied by a memo from him detailing the views and issues expressed at Tuesday's board meeting. The supervisor said he would request that the planning board recommend to the town board by Feb. 15 changes in the town code to make Bedford a more horse-friendly community.