

Chester to host ward forum

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CHESTER – Members of Preserve Chester, a group fighting the potential bloc-vote power of the incoming Hasidic Jewish development Greens at Chester, advanced its agenda Wednesday when the Town Board agreed to host a forum on dividing the town into wards.

On June 21, the town will welcome local government expert Gerald Benjamin, who heads the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz.

The move comes as construction is underway at the 431-home Greens at Chester subdivision, which is expected to eventually house about 3,000 residents.

Electing council members by wards is a tool citizens groups and public officials have utilized in an attempt to diminish Hasidic Jewish bloc-vote power. In Sullivan County's Town of Mamakating, for example, the switch to wards was partly driven by fears of bloc vote takeovers. Mamakating has been dealing with a major demographic change with the construction of the controversial, high-density Chestnut Ridge development that is attracting Hasidic Jewish families.

Benjamin and his staff guided the Town of Blooming Grove through a switch to wards that Blooming Grove approved in a November 2016 referendum.

Speaking at Wednesday's session, Preserve Chester members outlined a multipronged approach to stem Greens at Chester's potential bloc-vote power: wards, backing a Town Board move to set up a mechanism to purchase development rights on some properties, and working to increase voter turnout.

"Voter apathy is the biggest hurdle," said Steve Keahon, one of the co-founders of Preserve Chester. Keahon said Preserve Chester plans to reach out to like-minded organizations in other municipalities. "We'll have our own bloc vote," Keahon said.

Kristi Greco, the other Preserve Chester co-founder, pushed the board to try to steer the Greens at Chester builders toward some commercial development, as a means to reduce the population impact. But Deputy Supervisor Robert Valentine said the developers are committed to residential. "God knows we've tried," Valentine said.

The public hearing on the plan to buy up development rights is set for 7 p.m. June 13.

The session on ward conversion with Benjamin is set for 7 p.m. June 21 at the town senior center.

It could be the first major gathering held at the town's new senior center, located at 81 Laroe Road, if the building is completed in time. If the building isn't ready, the session will be held at the existing senior center in the lower level of the town library at 1784 Kings Highway.

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