

## In West Milford

# Women's shelter zone change approved by 3-2 vote

By KARIN WESTDYK

The ordinance amending West Milford's village commercial (V/C) zone to accommodate a shelter for battered and homeless women and children narrowly passed by a 3-2 vote. The amendment brought many citizens to the Feb. 6 West Milford Township Council meeting. Most supported changing the zoning requirements.

But not everyone was in support of a zone change. The township planning board, which reviewed the amendment at the council's request, unanimously decided the zone change was not appropriate. The board recommended the shelter apply to the Board of Adjustment for a use variance rather than have a zone-wide use change.

Councilwoman Dawn Sharkey said that it is likely other buildings in the V/C zone will be used for shelters. Councilman Ernest Fredericks, who voted against the amendment, argued the change will allow any building in the V/C zone to be used as a shelter, including storefronts.

Councilman Tom Parisi noted there is

a state statute which mandates such shelters be permitted in residential zones and that 80%-90% of the township's zoning permits the shelter's use. He added the facility in the V/C zone is ideally located for the shelter's purpose because of its close proximity to shopping, emergency medical services, and police.

Those speaking in support of the zone change included house-mothers from the shelter and several women who were helped through the organization's efforts as well as administrators of the program. It was pointed out that the shelter was important to West Milford since 75% of those receiving assistance are from the township. The organization's program was described as a process by which battered women and children can find safety, receive counselling, and be guided toward skill development and an alternative life.

Three people spoke against the zone change. Two complained that the children were often left unsupervised at the facility and felt that the location was not appropriate for children because of traffic

and a nearby pond.

Planning Board Chairwoman Mary Haase said she was supportive of the concept and has a good understanding of the problem but cautioned the council that it was talking about a zone change, not a particular use and that the appropriate route for this project is to go through the Board of Adjustment and apply for a use variance. She said the planning board was not opposed to the use, but opposed changing the zone to allow the use throughout the zone. She said approval of the change is counter-productive to the master plan and the zoning board.

Sharkey said she feared that if the idea went beyond the council, "It might get lost."

Parisi added there is no better zone for the use because of the V/C zone's access to services.

Sandy Ramos, the founder of Save our Sisters responded to Haase saying that supporting the project in concept does not help and that unless someone is part of the solution, they remain part of the problem. She explained there are no other

shelters in the upcounty area and stressed the importance of the location to the community members who need the shelter. She assured the council that people will not be imported to the shelter from other areas and that the organization is committed to cooperating with the township in meeting all regulations and stipulations.

Sharkey asked Ramos what might happen to the project if the organization is forced to go through the Board of Adjustment. Ramos explained that the funding could be jeopardized and that time is an important factor.

Ann Benedetto of Save our Sisters said that the shelter not only provides needed services, but the program itself can serve as a model for other shelters.

Larry Martini, a professional land planner and surveyor offered his services free of charge to the organization if it is determined that it must apply to the Board of Adjustment.

Fredericks said the focus should remain on addressing the ordinance, that the need for the shelter was not an issue on the table, and that the zone should not be changed for a site-specific situation. He said the ordinance is sexist in the way it is written because it does not include homeless men. He voted "no" along with Mayor James Robinson who explained he was sympathetic to the situation but felt there are problems with procedure.

The zone amendment was adopted after Councilman Richard Williams said it was appropriate for the council to change the zone.

