

A Modest Proposal?

Petrello wants to replace former White cottage

BY MICHAEL WRIGHT

It's a rare occurrence when an attorney handling a fairly straightforward demolition application before a local regulatory board opens the pitch for the proposed project with an admonishment to board members to set aside their personal feelings about the project. And even rarer when that the attorney, before any mention of dimensions or architectural design or height or setbacks, scolds members of the board about the limits of their authority.

But the confrontational stance is the one that Riverhead attorney Nica Strunk, representing Texas oilman Anthony Petrello, took with the Sagaponack Village Architectural and Historic Review Board at a public hearing last week when she opened her case for razing an aging oceanfront cottage.

"Every member on this board has to take a careful look at your own feelings on this matter," Ms. Strunk admonished, warning board members not to allow emotions and relationships to bias their duty-bound review of the application. "People idealize this type of structure. But that is not this board's decision to make."

Ms. Strunk was referring to a tiny, wood-paneled cottage perched among the ocean dunes in Sagaponack, along one of the most valuable stretches of real estate in the world. Her client, Mr. Petrello, has proposed tearing down the tiny cottage and replacing it with a 4,600-square-foot house, a generally modest building for the village and well below the maximum that local zoning would allow.

Mr. Petrello has been widely vilified by some Sagaponack residents for the legal assault he has mounted against one of the area's founding families and his former landlords, the White family. Mr. Petrello was awarded ownership of the oceanfront cottage he had rented for more than a decade by a court last year and, citing an agreement with the family, is now seeking to wrest ownership of dozens of acres of enormously valuable vacant land away from the family of John C. White, who have owned it for centuries.

The antipathy toward her client has already loaded the deck against Mr. Petrello when dealing with the local boards, Ms. Strunk insinuated. She noted that the eldest of Mr. White's sons, John N. White, sits on the very board reviewing the application. While he has abstained from the review of the application, she noted that he remained at the board table during the initial presentation of the demolition application last month, and that he was in the audience at Friday night's meeting.

She claimed that the board's scheduling of a public hearing on the application was out of the ordinary for such applications, calling it a "red flag" signaling that the board was inclined to give the application special consideration. She noted that the room was filled with local residents. "If this were an application by the White family, would there be as many people in this room?" she asked the board, rhetorically. "The Petrellos have the same rights ... and will fight to the fullest extent of the law to maintain that."

The board left open the hearing for written comments and

next will consider action on the proposed project.

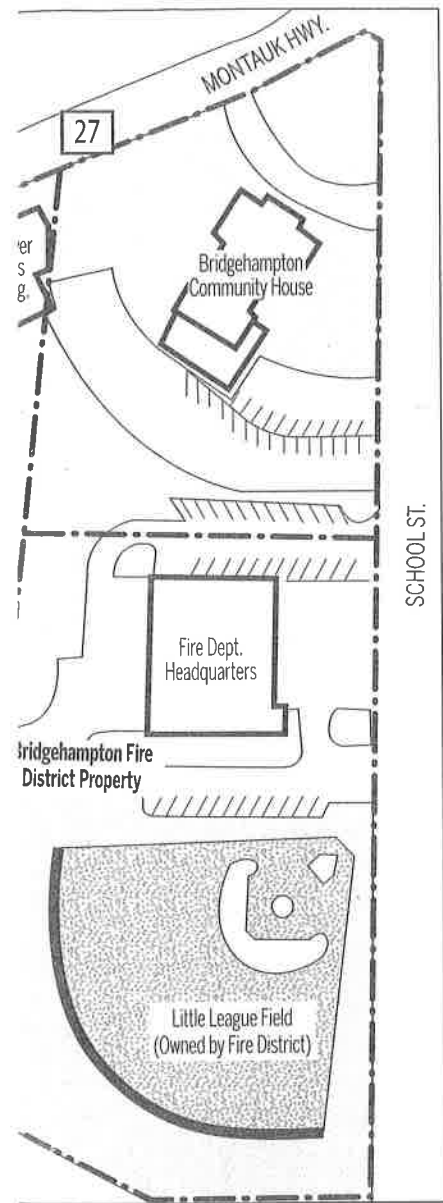
The application before the board calls for the razing of the 585-square-foot cottage and replacing it with a 4,600-square-foot, two-story house with a pool. The property is approximately 1½ acres, including the ocean beach in front of it. Local zoning would allow a house of some 6,500 square feet and up to 950 square feet of accessory structures on the property, according to Village Building Inspector John Woudsma.

The tiny cottage is one of a cluster of six, the former residences of the Whites' migrant farm workers. Mr. Petrello rented one of the other cottages for several years before the land deal soured the relationship.

Ms. Strunk called the cottage a health hazard that cannot be restored or renovated. A neighbor noted a short time later that the Petrellos had guests staying at the cottage as recently as this month.

The village's historic district is in the national register, Ms. Strunk noted, but has never been codified in village code. "As far as the village is concerned, the historic district doesn't exist," she said. Ad hoc historic preservation, Ms. Strunk said, "is a dangerous thing."

Two residents of Sagaponack, making only veiled references to Mr. Petrello himself, spoke against the project. One, neighbor Bruce Kaplan, pleaded with the board to see the historic value of the cottage. "It has a great history," he said. "Do not treat it as some unworthy structure, do not let it fall victim to the wrecking ball ... caught in the path of a Texas tornado."



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headquarters in March to help deal with the space issue, but were all shocked when they learned that it would cost approximately \$8 million, Mr. Halsey said. The board then shelved the plan, he said.

Purchasing the Pulver Gas property would cost far less than the earlier expansion plan, Mr. Halsey said. "Should we be successful in obtaining this property, it would produce a large financial savings to our taxpayers," he added.

The current firehouse was built nearly 30 years ago. Mr. Foster said that by looking at the potential acquisition of the Pulver Gas property, which district officials have been eyeing for quite some time, the board was looking toward the future.



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