

Mountain Lakes League of Women Voters
Housing Trends Consensus
April 1999

The Mountain Lakes League of Women Voters reaffirms its 1987 consensus, which states that the "unusual character of the borough is established not only by the style and size of the houses, but also by the way in which the houses are set in the topography. The generously treed landscape and sense of scattered undeveloped areas buffering homes in residential neighborhoods, and the landscaping features devised by the original developer, including narrow and winding roads, no fences, and the use of native materials, are physical aspects that should be preserved."

Our study found that some of the changes in town are pleasing; for one, the properties and houses in Mountain Lakes look better cared for. On the whole, however, the League believes there are some housing trends which threaten the overall character of our community. Our study and consensus discussions brought out the following concerns:

- Our open space and natural landscape are threatened by subdivision of lots, the many large additions to existing homes, and new construction. Our spectacular trees are also at risk due to a general lack of understanding on the part of homeowners and developers on how to conserve the trees.
- Demolition of smaller houses and their replacement by larger ones: this could affect the diversity of the population as well as changing our look of spaciousness.
- Demolition of older houses: the 450 "Hapgoods," the largest collection of Craftsman-style homes in the U.S., are part of our heritage and are one of the features that make Mountain Lakes unique.
- Zoning ordinances have been passed over time and sometimes do not appear to fit into a comprehensive plan.
- Zoning ordinances have not been enforced consistently.
- Difficulty for homeowners to make changes with stringent regulations.

We urge the Borough Council to consider the following recommendations:

- Investigate zoning tools to preserve the trees, streetscape, and historical aspects of town, and to delay demolitions. We suggest the formation of an ad hoc committee to study this, utilizing the services of a land-use attorney and a planner as consultants, as needed.
- Establish an Advisory Review Committee of architects, planners, lawyers, people with historical knowledge, and concerned citizens. This committee will provide free consultation on additions, alterations, and new construction. All demolition applications would be subject to review by this committee.
- Require training for all Planning Board and Zoning Board of Adjustment members, the Borough Zoning Officer and the Code Enforcement Official so that all have the same basis for understanding our ordinances. This is essential, considering the difficulty of interpreting, fairly and consistently, such a sensitive and important issue as the character of the community.
- Enforce ordinances consistently. Review existing ordinances to ensure that they are effective in supporting their initial intent, and that they are a comprehensive approach in addressing the Borough's housing issues. Also, analyze and reconsider those ordinances that are often violated.
- Investigate zoning incentives (such as a minor increase in FAR) and possible financial incentives to encourage owners to renovate rather than demolish.
- Devise methods of educating prospective homeowners, realtors, builders, landscapers and architects on the Master Plan's vision of the town, in particular the historical significance of the Hapgoods and the park-like landscaping. Specific suggestions brought out in consensus discussions are:
 1. A Borough published, short, eye-catching brochure with excerpts from the booklets "Historic Mountain Lakes" and "This is Mountain Lakes"
 2. Signs at the entrances to town welcoming people to "Mountain Lakes: the largest collection of Craftsman-style homes in the U.S.A."
 3. Plaques on historic sites to increase awareness of their importance
 4. Quarterly workshops informing people of the important style of Mountain Lakes' houses, their architectural uniqueness, and the consulting services offered by the Advisory Review Committee