

Hope Village and a Torn Community

Lawsuit Charges Discrimination

Maudie Weeks is a certified social worker who became involved in the Hope Village project 5 1/2 years ago through her work with migrants as executive director of an Auburn social agency. Mrs. Weeks explained that originally the town of Huron was selected as the site for a pilot project in rural, cooperative, low-income housing because Wayne County had great need for such housing and the Huron town officials demonstrated a willing attitude toward such a project.

Mrs. Weeks said that a town-planning board member offered to buy the first Richardson Road site and turn it over to Hope Village at the appropriate time. When the man refused to sell the site to Hope Village, apparently because of neighborhood pressure, Rev. Alex J. Brown offered to sell his adjacent land. Delays on the part of the town board, President Nixon's freeze on building, and finally a ruling by the State Environmental Conservation Department regarding drainage creeks eventually eliminated the site as a possibility.

A site closer to the Wolcott water and sewer system was then located on Clapper Road. On July 23, 1973, the Planning Board signed the plot plan for this new site and on the same day filed a zoning law making the site agricultural five acres, instead of the proposed medium density.

An application for a building permit under rezoning regulations was submitted in November, 1973 and turned down in March, 1974. A second application submitted in April, 1974, in accord with zoning regulations for multi-family dwellings, also was denied by the Zoning Board of Appeals in June, 1974, by a 2-2 tie vote with one abstention. Both applications, according to Mrs. Weeks, were submitted on

the recommendation of the Zoning Board of Appeals.

Six months later, in December, 1974, NAACP and NCADH filed a federal class-action suit against Huron in which they charged discrimination against low-income, minority families.

Mrs. Weeks supported the idea of a cooperative community of 25 single-family dwellings, claiming that blacks living separately would be swallowed up by the land and the community. She explained that such a situation already existed in the Huron area, where blacks live in allegedly deplorable conditions, often in migrant shanties intended only for summer use. She said, too, that the former migrants fear the wealthy farmers. She claimed that three Hope Villagers who approached the Town Planning Board in support of the project lost their jobs and homes. She said she feared for the safety of one black woman who had taken a public stand and allowed her name to be used on the class-action suit. She claimed that farmers want the blacks spread throughout the community so that they can control them.

She claimed that the home management training program that began in 1971 is effective. She said that hostile neighbors, if blacks were scattered among the whites, would devastate the egos of the former migrants.

Like town officials, Mrs. Weeks has financial concerns. She said that enough money already had been spent to build the houses and that the building expenses would be double the original cost due to inflation in the interim.

Text by Bonita Baldwin
Photos by Susan McKinney



Maudie Weeks points out the history of the dispute.



Not Racism, Official Says

Russell Freer, supervisor of the town board, presented the town's side of the Hope Village controversy in an early morning interview at his home last week. He explained that when he first heard of the Hope Village Project through Maudie Weeks four or five years ago, subdivision regulations were already in effect, but zoning was in the proposal stage. He said that subdivision regulations were established first because they were neither complicated nor controversial. The regulations required, according to Supervisor Freer, that potential builders be able to supply water and sewer systems since Huron, a rural area between Rochester and Syracuse, has no such public facilities.

The first plot, Freer said, was one on Richardson Road owned by Rev. Alex J. Brown, a black. Freer claimed that Brown's land was an upland swamp not desirable for building because of drainage problems. At the town's suggestion, Hope Village had the drainage tested. It failed.

At that time, Freer continued, a member of the town planning board offered to buy another site on Richardson Road with the intention of turning the land over to Hope Village when they were ready for it. Freer declined to elaborate on why the land was not sold to Hope Village as planned.

Hope Village then took an option to buy a 25-acre plot on Clapper Road, near enough to Wolcott to tie into their water and sewage systems. At the time that the option was taken, the proposed zoning was medium density, one acre plots. Since the land was purchased it has been rezoned to agricultural, five acres. Building permits have

twice been refused Hope Village. Freer contends that the 2-2 tie vote, with one abstention, on the last application was a negative vote by the Zoning Board of Appeals since the law requires a majority plus one, or 4-1 vote, for such a request to be granted.

Freer, a farmer, maintained that the issue was not racial. He claimed that Huron officials didn't realize that Hope Village was a black group until NAACP filed its law suit against them. He stated that the history of wells and septic tanks in the area would seem to make a settlement of 25 houses in one area a major problem.

The town also objects to the idea of 25 low-income families living in one area, according to Freer. He said that they wouldn't be in a low-income bracket if they didn't lack education or ability. "A new house won't solve their problems," Freer said that if the low income families lived on larger lots scattered throughout the community, there would be no water and sewage problem. The families also would have the assistance of their neighbors, he added.

Freer said he had learned in dealing with his own migrants that they don't want to live in groups, but preferred to be by themselves. He said that he and many of his friends would be glad to give a black family, an acre of land on which to build.

What bothers Freer most is the possibility that Huron, with a population of only 1,700, may have to respond to a \$500,000 law suit in drawn-out, expensive legal battles. It is unfair, he said, that the little guy must abide by zoning laws and that some big organization like NAACP can sue for special treatment.



Russell Freer talks to reporters in his home.

