

February 6, 2003

Hon. Jack Hayes, Supervisor
and Members of the Council
Town of Gardiner
Town Hall, 133 Main Street
Gardiner, NY 12525

Re: Awosting Reserve Development Proposal

Dear Supervisor Hayes and Members of the Gardiner Town Council:

I appreciate the opportunity to submit comments this evening regarding the development proposal recently submitted by Awosting Reserve, LLC and Chaffin/ Light Associates. This is an issue of great importance to the Towns of Gardiner, Shawangunk and Wawarsing, and for the entire region surrounding the Shawangunk Ridge. A large number of my constituents have contacted me over the past weeks to voice their concerns. I commend the Town of Gardiner for sponsoring tonight's meeting to begin a substantive public discussion on this development proposal whose impacts will certainly be felt most directly in Gardiner.

I applaud the Town Council's decision to seek the intervention of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation as lead agency in the SEQRA environmental review of Awosting Reserve's application. As you are aware, I forwarded separate letters to DEC Commissioner Erin Crotty and the Gardiner Town Council on January 21, 2003 regarding this issue. I stated my belief that due to the vast scale of the proposed Awosting Reserve development, the DEC is the only agency with the resources necessary to apply the appropriate level of scrutiny. The project will impact the sensitive ecology of the Shawangunk Ridge and have repercussions to the broader region. I am pleased that DEC is indicating their willingness to take lead agency responsibilities.

The Shawangunk Ridge is one of the Hudson Valley's greatest natural resources. The Ridge is recognized for its national and regional importance and is a destination for an estimated 500,000 visitors each year who come to enjoy bicycling, hiking, climbing, nature study and other outdoor activities. New York State recognized the significance and uniqueness of the Shawangunk Ridge in the *2002 NYS Open Space Conservation Plan*. The plan mentions the exemplary natural communities found along the Ridge and the more than 25 known rare plant and animal species found in the Shawangunk Mountains. The *Open Space Conservation Plan* further states:

"Taken together these elements of biodiversity make the Shawangunks one of the highest priority areas for biodiversity conservation in the northeastern United States...The unfragmented forest and barrens and the fractured bedrock aquifer of the Shawangunks assure high quality ground and surface water flow"...to the Rondout and Wallkill Valleys.

The Nature Conservancy, our nation's largest non-profit conservation organization, has rightly deemed the Ridge one of the "Last Great Places." The Ridge boasts a rich history of conservation and public enjoyment spanning from the conservation tradition begun in the late 1800's by the Smiley family to the creation of Minnewaska State Park Preserve and Sam's Point Preserve. It is fair to say that the Ridge is a large part of what defines our region and draws people to live in this area.

The development proposed by Awosting Reserve is being presented to the public as an environmentally friendly "conservation community" that will be an asset to the Ridge. The applications repeatedly refer to this development as a "cluster subdivision" that the developers claim will set a high standard for conservation planning and cluster development for our region. In reviewing this plan, though, there is a stark difference between the ecologically friendly language and the reality of the proposal.

Rather than an environmentally benign project, which utilizes the tenets of smart growth, this project provides a clear example of suburban sprawl, inappropriate land use and degradation of critical natural resources. The conservation rhetoric used throughout the application and during public presentations is disingenuous and does little to disguise the fact that this is just a very large suburban housing development on an inappropriate site. This development, targeted for a very ecologically sensitive area with no existing infrastructure, will threaten rare and endangered species, fragment critical wildlife habitat, lay down miles of new roads and destroy more than 540 acres of forest. This is clearly not consistent with smart growth planning or conservation ethics.

Awosting Reserve touts its proposal as a sustainable community for "families who wish to live simply with a conservation ethic." The plan calls for Adirondack style "cabins, cottages and retreats" referring to 349 new homes ranging from 2000-4500 square foot each. The applications include intentions to build a community swimming pool, fitness center, racquet courts, an 18-hole golf course, a 12,000 square foot golf house, pro shop, mountain lodge, dining facility, library, post office, Sales and Administration Building, and many other attendant buildings. More than 940 new parking spaces, a large number of new septic systems and a sewage treatment plant will be necessary to serve this new development. The Reserve's application also ironically mentions so-called "welcome houses" which will be installed at the two entrances to the development. This is one of a host of examples of the disingenuous phrases sprinkled lavishly throughout the proposal.

Awosting Reserve's references to simple living, conservation and sustainability in their application are not consistent with the actual details and provisions of their plan. In reality, this is a sprawling gated housing development that will be accessible to only the very wealthy. If this project is to set the standard for new smart growth in the region, as the developer maintains, the Hudson Valley is clearly in trouble.

The effects of this development will ripple throughout our communities. From the estimated 157,000-gallons of water used per day to the herbicides and pesticide runoff from the hundreds of acres of new golf course, the environmental impacts of the project will be substantial. The voluntary conservation easements trumpeted by the developers do not compensate for the fragmentation and disruption of a significant wildlife habitat. As most conservationists recognize, one of the most critical issues in dealing with wildlife and natural communities is to protect large swaths of undeveloped land from the very fragmentation being proposed by Awosting Reserve.

The impacts on the towns surrounding the development, particularly Gardiner, must also be considered. Local services will be further stretched by the influx of hundreds of new residents. The character of the Town of Gardiner will be permanently altered by this large-scale proposal. The development will certainly infringe on the resources that so many of us use and enjoy, including Minnewaska Park and Sam's Point. The awe-inspiring views looking out from the perches at Sam's Point, Gertrude's Nose, and Hamilton and Castle Points will be irreparably disfigured. This project is in sharp contrast to surrounding land use patterns and threatens the landscapes that the Ridge's one-half million visitors per year find so distinctive and appealing. It is important to keep in mind that these visitors contribute an estimated \$10 million to the local economy each year.

It is critical to the future of this area that this proposal's impacts on the environment and surrounding communities are given careful scrutiny by the DEC and the towns. The potential negative effects of this development on the recreational and scenic values of the Northern Shawangunks will impact this entire region. The current proposal is incomplete and leaves many questions and concerns unanswered. I strongly believe that this development is inappropriately sited and that the proposal submitted by Awosting Reserve represents a significant threat to the unique and irreplaceable natural resource provided by the Shawangunk Ridge.

Thank you again for considering my remarks. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of assistance in this important matter.

Sincerely,

Maurice D. Hinchey