

Awosting developer vows protection

By **DAWN LETUS**
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GARDINER — Despite mixed reactions to Thursday's presentation about a proposed 349-unit subdivision along the Shawangunk Ridge, everyone seems to agree that, from now on, the focus will be on the plan's environmental review.

During the 90-minute presentation, Awosting Reserve's developers, Chaffin/Light Associates, said it is conservation-minded and will protect 1,753 acres of the 2,660-acre property located in the towns of Gardiner, Shawangunk and Wawarsing. About 270 of those acres would be transformed into an 18-hole golf course near Tillson Lake.

The project would feature a wastewater-treatment facility and several recreational and educational buildings. It also would have 28 two- and three-bedroom cabins, 52 three- and four-bedroom cottages and 269 luxury retreats. The land on which the subdivision would be built rises in slope approximately 1,600 feet over a distance of 1.9 miles from Tillson Lake to its northern boundary with Minnewaska State Park.

U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey was among

some of the nearly 600 people at Walkkill High School for Thursday's presentation, and he said the development poses "a significant threat to the natural resources of the ridge."

Walkkill resident Anne Bienstock said Friday that the remarks made by Hinchey, D-Hurley, were a great relief to her and others.

A member of the Save the Ridge citizens organization and a former president of the Shawangunk Valley Conservancy, Bienstock said it troubles her that Chaffin/Light Associates calls itself an environmentally sensitive firm when it plans to clear up to 600 acres of forest at the outset.

"For (Hinchey) to come out that strong and that clear was just beyond my wildest dreams," Bienstock said. "I think he expressed the thoughts of many in the room."

Philip Ehrenschaft, a regional development specialist who owns property near the subdivision site, agreed.

"Regardless of the conservation and preservation language, Chaffin/Light is a predatory developer who can walk the walk and talk the talk," he said. "This is a proposal for an upscale, suburban housing development on environmentally sensitive land. It has no place

here."

But Gardiner Councilman Paul Colucci said Friday that the congressman was out of order.

"There was no call for that. (Hinchey) knows the process we have to go through," said Colucci, a Republican.

After Hinchey's speech, Gardiner Supervisor Jack Hayes said the talk turned to concerns over visibility, traffic, water and wastewater, as well as lost access to land.

"I am glad so many people came," Hayes said. "It gave everyone a chance to dispel some of the rumors floating around. ... Now we will begin moving into a more formal review of the project."

Hayes said the Town Board will hold a special meeting on Feb. 25 to hire an engineering consultant to review the project. The board that night also might declare the state Department of Environmental Conservation the lead agency in the Environmental Quality Review process, he said.

Said Colucci: "This is merely Act I folks. We have a long way to go and many acts to go through before the curtain closes. Let's see how it goes. If nothing else, it's going to be a great learning experience."