

Community threatens land eyed for protection

■ Two Luzerne County conservation plans recommend that part of the 429 acres where Congregation Shari Limud is looking to build homes remain untouched.

By **MARK KATCHUR**

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Much of a Jewish community proposed for the east side of Hazleton and Hazle Township would be built on land that two Luzerne County conservation plans recommend remain untouched.

The two plans contend that the 2,361-acre natural area – dubbed the Stockton Mountain Barrens – has unique plants and wildlife, some that are uncommon not only in Pennsylvania, but also worldwide.

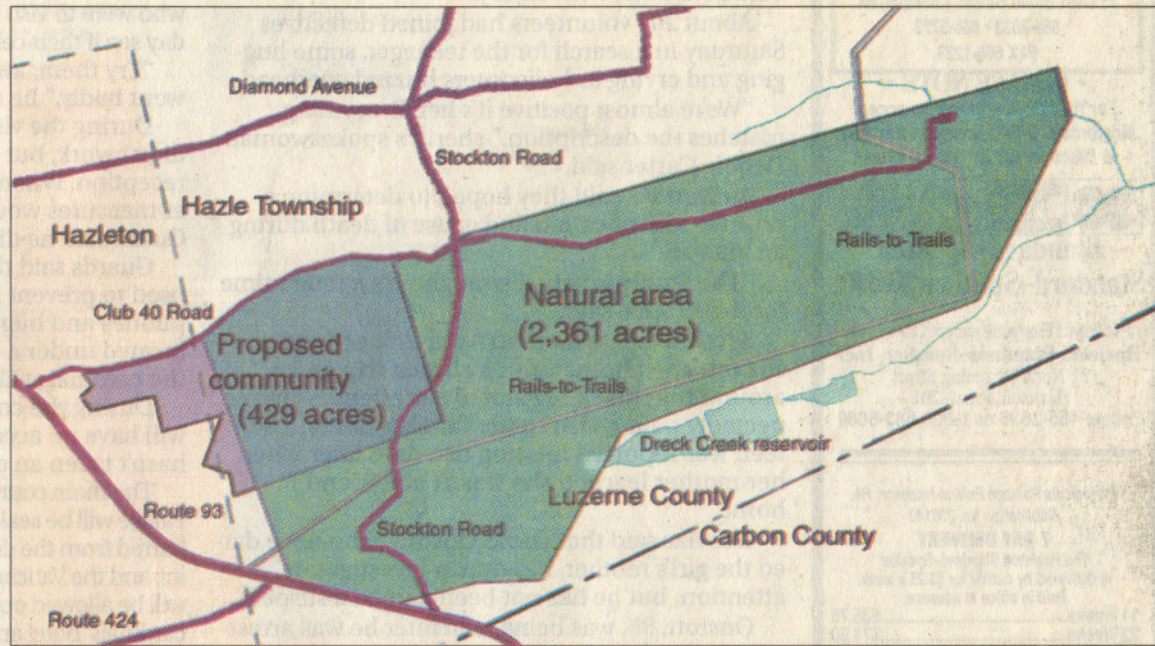
Scientists performed tests there as recently as September

and found two rare types of moth, one that is known to exist only in fewer than 100 places on Earth.

Congregation Shari Limud Inc. would build a community of homes and schools on a 429-acre parcel – mostly bound by Route 93, Club 40 Road and the Stockton Road – that straddles the west edge of the ridgetop where the natural area is found.

The group won't buy the land, however, unless Hazle Township agrees to change the zoning designation, from conservation to planned residential. The township's planning department will likely consider the request this month.

Luzerne County recently teamed with Lackawanna County to draft a plan that advises local planners on which



A 429-acre community that Congregation Shari Limud proposes to build is shown in purple and blue. A natural area called the Stockton Mountain Barrens that is recommended for conservation is shown in green and blue. The blue area is where the community would converge upon the natural area.

See **COMMUNITY, A2**

Community

(Continued from A1) areas should remain off-limits to development.

The Stockton Mountain Barrens is included in that report – the Open Space, Greenways and Outdoor Recreation Master Plan – as well as the Luzerne County Natural Areas Inventory prepared in 2001.

“This isolated dry, exposed ridgetop includes unique pitch pine-scrub oak vegetation communities,” the bi-county plan reads. “These ecological communities support rare plant and animal habitat unique to Pennsylvania and deserve immediate protection from future man-made disturbances.”

The terrain is not favorable for development, according to Rocky Gleason, a county

inventory ecologist with The Nature Conservancy, which helped draft Luzerne County’s NAI.

“These types of habitats have a very thin soil, some parts are very rocky, and its trees are prone to wildfires,” he said. “In fact, it’s a fire-dependent system” that has endured several brush fires in recent years.

Biologists with The Nature Conservancy discovered the rare Pink Sallow moth living within the Stockton Mountain Barrens, feeding on blueberry and oak.

They found the moth in traps set during the fall, when it is most active. A black light in the trap attracts the moth at night.

The Pink Sallow moth is classified as a G3 – meaning it

is vulnerable to extinction globally with only 21 to 100 known instances. The Nature Conservancy employs a scale that measures the threat to a particular species worldwide, from G1, critically imperiled, to G5, secure.

“A G3 is a big story,” Gleason said. “That (classification) is pretty rare for Pennsylvania.”

Another moth found at the Stockton Mountain Barrens is classified as a G5. Both types of moth rank as S1, or critically imperiled at the state level and found in only five or fewer locations.

The moths are found along the ridgetop because the habitat is favorable and their food source is plentiful, according to Betsy Ray, an invertebrate zoologist with The Nature

Conservancy.

They rarely if ever leave because there is not a similar habitat nearby, Ray said. A natural area on the other side of Hazleton near Humboldt, which features pitch pine and scrub oak, is the closest match.

“If (the Stockton Mountain Barrens) were to be developed, the habitat would cease to exist,” Gleason said.

Paul Matulevich, chairman of the Hazle Township Planning Department, and Adrian Merolli, executive director of the Luzerne County Planning Commission, did not return calls for comment last week.

Last year, Merolli told the *Standard-Speaker* that the open space plan for Luzerne and Lackawanna counties is a guide for local planners.

“It says to them, ‘Maybe

you should look into building elsewhere,’” he said.

Attorney Christopher Slusser, who is representing Congregation Shari Limud, has declined comment until he presents the proposal at an upcoming township meeting.

The group has not filed any applications with the City of Hazleton, Paul Kattner of the zoning office said, although about one-fifth of its community would be within the city limits, according to a map on file in Hazle Township.

On the Net:

Lackawanna and Luzerne counties’ Open Space, Greenways and Outdoor Recreation Master Plan:

http://www.luzernecounty.org/luzerne/CWP/view.asp?A=1186&QUESTION_ID=470235