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Residents rally for and against Ann Arbor suicide prevention nonprofit's proposed center

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3900 North Dixboro Road in Superior Township on Monday, July 26, 2021. The property is the proposed site of the Garrett's Space residential center for young people experiencing anxiety and depression. Alyte Katilius | The Ann Arbor News

NEW!

By **Lucas Smolcic Larson | ismolciclaron@mlive.com**

WASHTENAW COUNTY, MI – Just four days after he would have turned 29, Scott and Julie Halpert have cleared another hurdle in their journey to establish a residential center outside Ann Arbor they say could have made a difference for their son Garrett, who died by suicide in 2017.

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Their nonprofit, Garrett's Space, aims to transform a wooded 76-acre property in Superior Township into a retreat-like sanctuary offering support to young people struggling with depression and anxiety.

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On Wednesday, April 26, the township Planning Commission voted unanimously to recommend approval of a rezoning and area plan for the project — a key first step.

The rezoning proposal has kicked off a groundswell of opposition from neighbors to the property at 3900 North Dixboro Road, in the rural area a few miles northeast of Ann Arbor, as well as vocal backing from Washtenaw County leaders and mental health professionals.

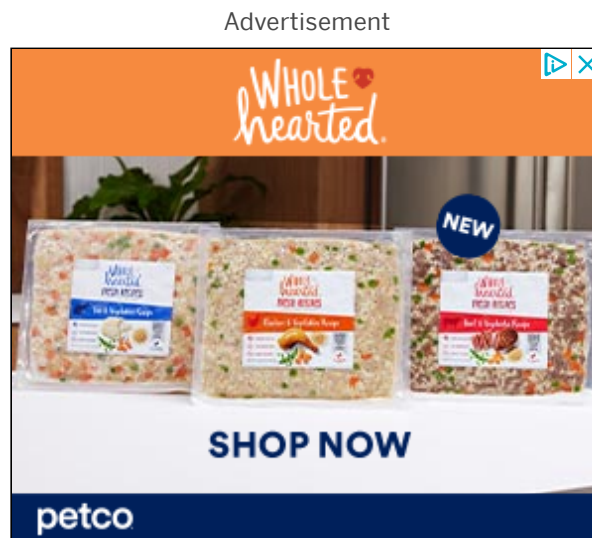
Competing viewpoints dominated nearly three hours of comment during a public hearing held in front of a standing room-only audience that spilled out into the entryway and lined the walls.

Read more: [Neighbors oppose Ann Arbor suicide prevention nonprofit's plans for new center](#)

Residents who oppose the rezoning for the Garrett's Space project say they have no problem with the group's mission, but the center has no place in the agriculturally-zoned area near residential neighborhoods, with some also voicing fears over the nonprofit's clients and its impact on their homes in scores of letters to the township.

"The Garrett's Space proposal is not in the slightest similar to what's been established in the area, so that use will stick out like a sore thumb," said Gregory Need, an attorney representing 39 nearby residents in a presentation on Wednesday.

The goals of the center are laudable and the need for mental health care great, he said, but the area's rural-residential designation is meant to accommodate large-lot homes with a few farms, Need said.



In turn, the Halperts and a team representing the Garrett's Space proposal argued the project's setting, immersed in nature, is critical to their treatment model.

The nonprofit aims to house 15 to 20 young adults for voluntary three to four week stays, where activities like art, music, meditation and yoga will complement support groups focused on building connections and developing coping strategies, Scott Halpert said.

Garrett's Space will use an existing 5,000-square foot home on the property, while planning to construct another roughly 12,000 square-foot residential center and a 2,000-square foot "creativity studio," clustered around the existing structure.

The center is designed to supplement formal mental health treatment and therapy, not serving people with symptoms of psychosis or mania, anyone posing a danger to themselves and people requiring a high-degree of medical attention or court-ordered treatment, according to the nonprofit's Clinical Director Peggy Galimberti.

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Shorter stays are designed to make the center more attainable, with fees on a sliding scale, said Halpert, who cited statistics showing more than half of young people struggle with depression and anxiety, with mental health crisis calls for them in Washtenaw County up 20% this year.

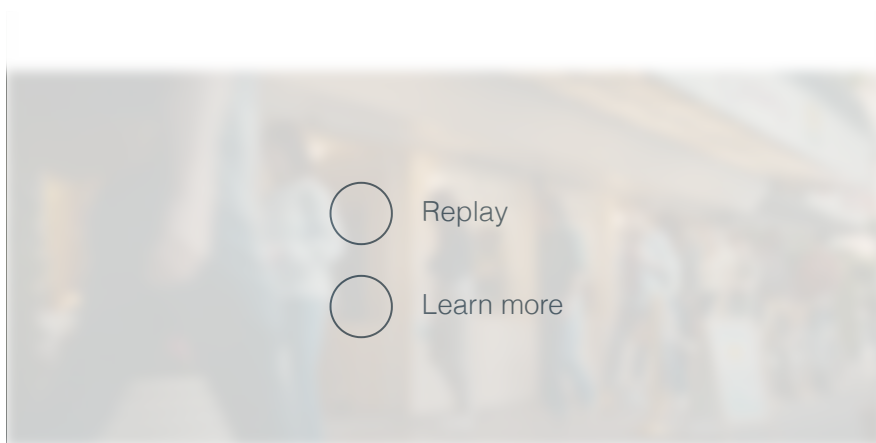
The Garrett's Space team said they are committing to put 55 to 60 acres of the property under a conservation easement, with new construction the length of three football fields away from nearby homes and buffered by woods.

When the owners of the land, late Ann Arbor restaurateur Dennis Serras and his wife Ellie, purchased the property, they immediately subdivided it, intending to develop much of the 76 acres, Ellie Serras said at the Wednesday meeting.

She was pursuing that plan after her husband's death, when she decided to sell the property one last time, leading to the Garrett's Space offer.

"My girls and I believe Garrett's Space is the highest and best use of our property," Serras said.

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An architect and land consultant with the nonprofit said the proposal would be “much less intensive” than a potential 34-home residential development that could be permitted on the land.

Still, Need argued such a comparison was “more like a scare tactic” since steep slopes and wetlands on the property would severely limit its development potential.

Septic systems proposed for the property appear noncompliant because of the slopes, and an existing trail system easily links to neighboring homes, with no fence proposed around the center, he said.

A “medical services” classification would be more appropriate than the proposed “planned community” zoning change, Need said, describing the center as a commercial use akin to a “managed care facility” with “dormitory-style housing.”

While many residents he represented ceded their speaking time to the attorney, others who lived in the area spoke up on Wednesday.

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“I chose to live here for my three sons. I picked it deliberately. I picked it based on the fact that I thought how I interpreted the master plan to be, as a place (that was) rural residential, not a place where people migrate every four to six weeks,” nearby resident Shabnam Shidfar said.

Others criticized the chosen location.

“Why aren’t we pushing to have it in a place where they can get more bang for our buck, instead of going to a location, a Frank Lloyd Wright-style home that’s not fit for a facility such as this,” said Stephen Henley, a neighbor who questioned the multimillion-dollar home as the best fit for Garrett’s Space.

Outnumbering the opponents were some 25 supporters of the proposal, ranging from counseling professors at Eastern Michigan University to a biologist advocating for the conservation of a creek running along the property.

Many cited an ongoing mental health crisis among young people and the scarcity of treatment options like Garrett's Space.

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“I think Superior Township is poised to be a role model for actually benefiting the wellbeing of the country and even the world,” said Dr. John Greden, a psychiatrist and founder of the Frances and Kenneth Eisenberg and Family Depression Center at the University of Michigan.

The plans also are endorsed by local officials ranging from [Washtenaw County Health Officer Jimena Loveluck](#), to every member of the county's delegation of state representatives, as well as local congresspeople.

Read more: [Ann Arbor suicide prevention nonprofit gets \\$4M to build residential center](#)

Some neighboring residents also said they would embrace the center.

“We have no concerns about the young people who will be visiting and living at Garrett's Space, and we will welcome them as our neighbors. If they wander off the property and onto our property that's great. They'll meet my wife,” said Bill Godfrey, who lives nearby.

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Following more than three hours of presentations and public comment, township Planning Commissioners voted 5-0 in favor of the proposal, with the condition that the conservation easement be required, in addition to a land use and zoning agreement limiting how the property can be used.

The rezoning isn't yet approved, and will now go to the township board for final consideration. If successful, Garrett's Space would then have to pass through a site plan review process.

The nonprofit hopes to complete construction on the \$10-million project in early 2026, provide day programming for a year and begin overnight stays in 2027, Halpert said.

For some, support for the nonprofit is personal. Teresa Ayers, who spoke on Wednesday, said her she lost her daughter to suicide 18 months ago.

"Until you have sat in a full psychiatric ER for over 24 hours with no care at all, you do not understand the depth of the crisis," she said.

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“Garrett’s Space is needed now. Our family needed it 24 months ago, and it could have saved my daughter’s life.”

Resources are available for those seeking mental health treatment and support. Anyone experiencing distress or thoughts of suicide can seek help from:

- *The 24-hour [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) by dialing 988*
- *The Ozone House, a 24-hour hotline for youth, at 734-662-2222*
- *The 24-hour hotline at University of Michigan Psychiatric Emergency Services at 734-936-5900*
- *The Washtenaw County Community Mental Health crisis team at 734-544-3050*

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