

# Rationale for the RaNic Golf Club PDZ in the Village of Cayuga Heights

September 12, 2022

According to Section 305-43.D of the Village Code, a Planned Development Zone shall not be utilized where the objectives or recommendations of the Village's Comprehensive Plan can otherwise be accomplished in accordance with the zoning district regulations. The proposed improvements to the RaNic Golf Club are being pursued with the primary goal of sustaining the existence of the golf course operation which has struggled financially in recent years. Membership numbers have been down since their peak in 2004 which led to the 2021 sale of the property to Sean and Jennifer Whittaker. The new owners are hoping to boost the economic viability of the golf course and preserve the more than 100 acres of recreational open space by adding the following integral features:

1. New housing for a core resident membership base to add to the existing 120+/- current members
2. New boutique hotel to accommodate visitors generating revenue to help pay for maintenance of the facility.
3. Renovated clubhouse with food and beverage services, golf shop, fitness and golf simulators.
4. Renovated golf course to improve infrastructure and the overall quality of play.

None of the above features are feasible without first establishing a PDZ as they are all interrelated and dependent upon each other.

Each of the primary factors to be considered by the Board of Trustees in their decision to establish a PDZ for the proposed improvements to the RaNic Golf Club are listed below along with an initial response from the development team highlighting why the establishment of a PDZ will have a positive net benefit to the Village.

## **(1) Preserving and enhancing neighborhood character**

The Village's 2014 Comprehensive Plan states that Cayuga Heights has historically been a residential neighborhood and advocates that it continues to be one. Village zoning has found a golf course to be consistent with a residential neighborhood and an allowed land use in the Village's Residence Zoning District. The golf club has functioned in this location since the 1950's, and the new owners of this property would like to continue its operation. The PDZ being requested, by allowing for the construction of a hotel and townhomes, will put the club on the sustainable economic footing needed to ensure that it can continue to operate as it has done.

The hotel is envisioned as a high-end, boutique hotel with the number of rooms limited to between 50 and 60. Although a hotel is a commercial land use not allowed in the Residence Zoning District or in any other Zoning District in the Village, it will be located within a short walking distance to the Community Corners area and the adjacent Commercial Zoning District. It will, in addition, be largely screened from view by trees preserved during construction and its architecture will be compatible with that of the surrounding neighborhood.

Townhomes are a residential land use but not a housing type currently allowed in the Residence Zoning District or in any other Zoning District. Eight townhomes will be located in the Village with the rest located in the Town of Ithaca portion of the site. All townhomes will be linked by creating a local residential neighborhood effect with

street trees, sidewalks, and on-street parking for cars. Therefore, the hotel and townhomes will not disturb the existing neighborhood character and, by putting the club on a sustainable economic footing, will thereby preserve the golf course property as open and recreational space and hopefully enhance the neighborhood.

## **(2) Compatibility with adjacent development and land uses**

RaNic is located in the Village's Residence Zoning District. Properties to the north, south, and east are residential. To the west, on the other side of Pleasant Grove Road, is the Village Fire station and the Village's Commercial Zoning District which includes the Corners Community Shopping Center and Carriage House Apartments. The sidewalk network to be developed on the RaNic property will connect to an existing public sidewalk on Pleasant Grove and facilitate pedestrian trips to the Community Corners area. Given their residential character and the neighborhood design context, the townhomes will be compatible with adjacent development and land uses.

The project has functioned as a golf course, private club/restaurant, and event space since the 1950's, making it a long standing feature of the Cayuga Heights community which will hopefully continue to exist long into the foreseeable future.

Adding a boutique hotel in the Village will provide an economic boost to support and preserve the golf course use while increasing the local supply of well-managed rooms for guests, reducing the demand for un-hosted Airbnb or similar short-term rentals throughout the Village.

## **(3) Mitigating negative impacts on traffic, parking, and stormwater management**

The project will increase the intensity of use by constructing a hotel and townhomes when compared to the recent downturn in active membership use. This greater intensity of use will likely increase traffic to and from the site over what has been seen in recent years. A traffic study being conducted by SRF Associates will determine if the proposed development results in any potentially significant adverse traffic impacts to the neighborhood and, in particular, to the intersection of Hanshaw and Pleasant Grove Roads. SRF will make recommendations for any mitigations to these adverse traffic impacts. SRF will also perform an analysis of the proposed parking on site. The parking analysis will indicate if the proposed number of parking spaces will be sufficient to accommodate parking needs, and the development team will adjust the site plan and/or program accordingly.

Townhome and hotel construction will also add impervious surface and therefore increase the amount of stormwater runoff. The installation of engineered stormwater practices will reduce post-construction stormwater runoff compared to the pre-construction stormwater runoff per NYS regulations.

Traffic, parking and stormwater will each be evaluated by the developer's engineering team and reviewed by the Village engineer for compliance with NYS laws and best practice guidelines. The Village may wish to engage their own independent engineering consultants (paid for by the developer) to evaluate the results of the study.

The traffic analysis required for this project has the potential to help further the planning and perhaps some of the implementation of traffic solutions for the intersection of Pleasant Grove and Hanshaw Roads.

#### **(4) Avoidance of an undue burden on the Village's infrastructure**

The golf course and clubhouse currently utilize Village water and sewer. The proposed project will increase the current demands on sewer and water with the addition of the hotel and townhomes. All of the infrastructure needed to support these new uses will be installed and maintained on privately owned land without dedicating any new municipal utilities. The existing infrastructure for sewer and water outside the property boundaries may need upgrades to support the full build out of this proposed project. The developer will work with the Village engineer to identify and make necessary improvements to all utilities required to meet the increased demand.

#### **(5) Protection of natural resources**

The golf course provides a natural setting and open space for flora and fauna in the midst of a densely populated residential neighborhood. This is consistent with Cayuga Heights founder Jared E. Newman's conception of the Village as a residential park. Improvement of the property as facilitated by the PDZ will put the club on the sustainable economic footing needed to ensure that the course remains open space for the foreseeable future.

The natural stream course that runs through the property from east to west is bookended by delineated wetlands. The wetlands and stream will be protected and enhanced by this project per DEC guidelines. The existing stream has been buried in underground culvert pipes in certain areas which are clearly too small in diameter to handle the water flow during heavy rain events. This project will provide the opportunity to open these culverts and armor stream banks in adherence with DEC best practice guidelines.

Despite good intentions many trees were added to the golf course over the past 50 years which have since significantly diminished the quality of the golfing experience. The quality of turfgrass has suffered as well as the playability of the course itself. The quality of the golf facility and visitor experience is critical in attracting a stronger local membership, new residents, and hotel guests. A higher quality golf facility will also allow RaNic to host local, regional and state level tournaments which further support the economic viability of the golf course long into the future. All of the trees that have already been removed were badly damaged, diseased, unsightly, nearing the end of their natural life, or directly in the way of the game of golf or detrimental to the ability to maintain turfgrass. More trees are still being evaluated for removal as the golf course undergoes continued renovation work. Despite the removal of trees, hundreds of mature trees will remain, preserving a park-like setting. Thinning of the densest and most mature areas of the golf course will allow many remaining magnificent oaks and other upland tree species to continue to thrive with less competition for sun, water, and nutrients. Additionally, many trees have suffered from decades of compaction caused by golf carts and foot traffic. A formalized network of dedicated golf cart paths and decompaction techniques will help protect the sensitive root zones of the remaining trees.

New plantings will be included in a way that is more sensitive to the routing of the golf course as to not interfere with the game or create future maintenance challenges. These plantings will be largely focused on functional things like screening and protection of roads, cars and existing homes.

Large swaths of native plantings are also planned to be introduced to reduce the overall area of the more intensely managed turfgrass. These native areas provide habitat for ground nesting birds, beneficial insects, and other fauna.

#### **(6) Promoting environmental sustainability**

The owner has committed to pursuing the USGBC LEED for Neighborhood Development certification for the project. LEED ND is a nationally recognized green building standard for neighborhood development that covers several aspects of sustainability including walkability, transit, energy performance, waste management and many more. The project requires an integrative design process with core prerequisites along with several optional credits which all contribute to varying levels of certification from silver, gold to platinum. The project team believes that pursuing LEED ND will provide a comprehensive and robust third-party verified response to environmental sustainability which the Village can rely on.

The former Country Club of Ithaca had participated in the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf (ACSP). The ACSP is an award winning education and certification program that helps golf courses protect our environment and preserve the natural heritage of the game of golf. By helping people enhance the valuable natural areas and wildlife habitats that golf courses provide, improve efficiency, and minimize potentially harmful impacts of golf course operations, the program serves an important environmental role worldwide. RaNic will renew the voluntary participation in the ACSP to protect flora and fauna and reduce downstream impacts.

Some specific sustainable features of the proposed project include but are not limited to the following:

1. High-efficient heat pump technology for optimized heating and cooling.
2. Enhanced thermal envelop for new construction that exceeds NYS Energy Code (meeting or exceeding the City and Town of Ithaca Energy Code Supplement).
3. Low VOC materials and finishes
4. Regionally sourced building materials
5. Reduced indoor water usage
6. Rainwater management
7. Reduced heat island effect
8. Electric vehicle charging stations and bicycle parking
9. Environmental Management Practices for Golf Courses per the ACSP for Golf

### **(7) Provision of safe and convenient vehicular, bicycle and pedestrian circulation**

The project will be creating a through driveway with street trees, sidewalks, and on-street parking for cars with accommodations for golf carts and bicycles. The goal is to create a traffic calmed experience with 10-15MPH speed limits and raised crosswalks, which function as speed bumps, which provides alternative routes for people accessing the property from either Pleasant Grove or Hanshaw Roads.

The driveway will be designed to accommodate vehicles, golf carts, and bicycles with separate sidewalks for pedestrians only. The new sidewalk connection along the entry drive will connect directly to the existing TCAT stop and crosswalk to Community Corners.

Preferred parking for electric vehicles and bicycle parking will be provided per LEED ND standards.

### **(8) Provision of space for recreation and other public use**

The project at its core is intended to preserve the park-like golf course as a recreational amenity open to the entire community. Off season walking, birding, cross country skiing have been an informal aspect of this property since its origins and will continue into the future. Dedicated walking paths around the clubhouse, hotel and

townhomes with sidewalk connections to Hanshaw Road, Pleasant Grove Road, and Community Corners will provide a dedicated pathway for dog-walkers, joggers and strollers.

Installation of new signage to provide wayfinding and education about the property will help inform and protect the public from straying into harm's way from errant golf shots.

The introduction of a spa and expanded food and beverage services will add to the existing uses available to the general public.

All of the amenities provided will be accessible to residents of the Village with discounted costs for Village residents.

### **(9) Coordination with the requirements of county, state, and federal statutes**

The project is required to be reviewed under New York's State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA). This review will assess the environmental impact of the project's proposed improvements. It is anticipated that, since the majority of the golf course is located in the Town of Ithaca, the Town will be lead agency responsible for conducting the SEQRA review and making a determination of environmental impact. However, the Village, as part of the PDZ and site plan review process, will be able to submit to the Town any environmental concerns it may have prior to the Town making its SEQRA determination. In addition, the Village's Planning Board will consider environmental factors in conducting site plan review.

Stormwater management and wetland protections are the primary County, State and Federal statutes that apply. Because the existing facility was constructed long before modern stormwater regulations were established, the redevelopment of this property will create the opportunity to bring the facility in line with modern practices. The project team will develop a Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) which will be reviewed by Village and Town staff for compliance with state regulations. Work on maintaining and improving the wetland and stream corridor will be done in coordination with the DEC and Army Corps.

### **(10) Consistency with the Village's Comprehensive Plan.**

The PDZ provides the opportunity to accomplish several of the goals and objectives stated in the Village's 2014 Comprehensive Plan.

*Goal ES1: Preserve the Village's scenic, naturalistic setting while protecting natural resources and improving recreational opportunities.*

The Comprehensive Plan calls for the provision of a wide variety of recreational and fitness opportunities (Objective QL1.4, page 47) while noting the lack of available space within the Village for the development of new parks (page 73). It recommends working with Kendal at Ithaca to investigate ways in which all or part of its property adjacent to Renwick Brook can be permanently protected as public open space and to identify suitable uses for that space (page 74). When the Comprehensive Plan was written in 2014, the Ithaca Country Club was a private facility. Resurrected now as RaNic, the club is open to the public and provides diverse, all-season recreational opportunities to Village residents.

*Goal EC1: Maintain and enhance the economic vitality of the Village and in particular its retail and commercial center.*

The Comprehensive Plan calls for the re-invigoration of the Community Corners area as the economic and social hub of the Village (Objective EC1.3, page 54). The redevelopment of the RaNic clubhouse and the construction of the new hotel and townhouses, in close proximity to Community Corners and readily accessible by sidewalks, will increase activity in the area and contribute to its economic and community vitality.

*Goal HO1: Ensure that a variety of high-quality housing options are available to persons wishing to reside in the community.*

The Comprehensive Plan recognized (page 83) the changing nature of the American household and the need for a variety of housing types to address this change. The proposed townhomes represent a housing type not previously available in the Village and in low supply locally. They will offer Village residents, including empty nesters or snowbirds resident for the summer only, the opportunity to downsize from their current homes to more modest and less maintenance intensive dwellings. It is similar in this respect to Kendal at Ithaca, a much larger development, which was approved by the Village as a Planned Unit Development (PUD) in 1993.

### **Summary of Benefits**

1. Preservation of the park-like open space and recreational activities.
2. Conversion of a private members-only club to a publicly accessible facility with discounts for Village residents.
3. Enhanced stormwater management.
4. Access to well-managed hotel rooms for Village residents' friends and families within closer proximity than other options.
5. Additional and improved food and beverage options for Village residents.
6. Spa and fitness facilities available to Village residents at discounted rates.
7. Increased foot traffic to Community Corners to support local shops and services.
8. New for-sale housing options for Village residents looking to downsize and simplify (snow birds, aging in place, etc.).
9. Commitment to sustainable design of new buildings and environmental management of the golf course.
10. Increased property tax base to support local infrastructure, municipal salaries, police, fire, etc.
11. Hotel room tax collected by the County supports local tourism.
12. Creation of new jobs with living wages.
13. Improvements to traffic flow by providing new access points to Hanshaw Road.