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## Tilapia time-out

Zoning board mulls fish farm on Sheep Pasture

By [Jennifer Choi](#)

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Following a nearly two-hour discussion of a proposed aquaculture project, Brookhaven zoning board members Jan. 20 voted to hold the matter of Blue Green Farms open for additional public comment until the board's Feb. 17 meeting.

Representing Blue Green Farms, which wants to establish a fish farm on 25 acres of land that previously belonged to Lawrence Aviation Industries, now a federal EPA Superfund site, attorney Sy Gruza appealed the town Building Department's revocation of a building permit, issued Sept. 28 and revoked Oct. 22, for a 33,000-square-foot aquaculture building and 80 tanks for cultivating fish for consumption.

The project, as explained by Gruza, includes the excavation of up to 300,000 cubic yards of soil to install a complex pool unit about 25 feet deep, where fish waste pumped from the tanks would settle and become nutrients. The nutrient-rich water from the pool unit would then be used to grow vegetables hydroponically in a greenhouse, according to the attorney, a member of the Weber Law Group in Melville. Once the nutrients have been removed, the fresh water would be pumped back into the tanks.

Citing the town's Farmland Bill of Rights, Gruza said the clearing and grating necessary to establish the fish farm are included in the list of farming practices protected under town law. In terms of excavation, Gruza said the town solely prohibits excavating more than what is necessary for a given project and does not discriminate "based on volume." While some zoning board members questioned the need for such a large scale excavation project, the attorney explained that installing a complex pool unit is common practice for aquaculture facilities.

When asked Friday about the feasibility of establishing the fish farm without a pool unit, Gruza said it's "not realistically" possible. "This is not unique to Blue Green Farms," he said. "It's not experimental."

Responding to possible concerns about sand mining, the attorney said last week, "There's no sand mining that's going to take place. The only excavation that will

occur is the excavation that's necessary to establish this facility. It's no different than if you were going to build an office building, you have to excavate to build a foundation."

At the zoning board meeting, Gruza said the aquaculture project would be completed in phases, the first of which would cost \$1.4 million for the installation of a recharge basin for stormwater runoff and construction of the aquaculture building and greenhouse. The excavation process would not begin until the next phase, Gruza said, stressing that his clients would be fully invested in developing a fish farm by this time.



A DEC officer standing in a vast hole at the Lawrence Aviation Industries site in Port Jefferson Station gives perspective to the 2007 illegal sand mining by Eugene Fernandez. File photo. ([click for larger version](#))

James Wilde, chief scientist of Blue Green Farms, said the goal is to establish a "green, sophisticated system" proven to grow healthy freshwater and saltwater fish and crustaceans.

Several community members spoke against the fish farm at the Jan. 20 meeting. Matt Berolino, a Port Jefferson Station resident for 11 years, said the project "will hurt the market value" of the homes in surrounding areas. This facility is "something that should be put somewhere else," Berolino said, and called the lack of a buffer in the proposed plan "a slap in the face."

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## Are sand mining concerns legit?

According to Blue Green farms attorney Leonard Shore, Eugene Fernandez "is involved with the corporation." But Shore dismissed references to Fernandez's history of environmental violations in Suffolk, including illegal sand mining on the Lawrence Aviation Industries site, as a "smokescreen" put up by the Town. Blue Green Farms would not be operating on the former LAI site, Shore said.

Instead, Blue Green Farms is under contract with the Sisters of Maryhaven for 25 acres contiguous to that sprawling property, Shore said, land previously part of the estate of Gerald Cohen, whose son LAI head Gerald Cohen Jr., pleaded guilty to illegally storing hazardous materials, pollution that created one of Long Island's costliest Superfund sites.

Fernandez has been fined a combined \$120,000 by the state Department of Environmental Conservation for illegal mining at the Lawrence Aviation Industries site in 2007 and illegally conducting solid waste activities in Dix Hills in 2008. The DEC estimates Fernandez removed 1,000 tons of sand from LAI without a permit or reclamation bond for the operation of a mine.

— WILLINGER

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