

# THE PRINCETON PACKET



SOLUTIONS

By Huck Fairman

## Residents fight to preserve a neighborhood environment

This column has mostly reported on environmental challenges and responses, local, regional and global.

The town of Princeton, and its institutions, have been leaders in responding to those challenges and preserving environments.

But recently, in what is admittedly a very local, even microcosmic issue, the town has made a decision that seems to ignore many of the concerns and values that it usually supports. It certainly has elicited the disapproval and anger of many local residents.

At issue is the placing of a new First Aid and Rescue facility *and* a town refueling station at the edge of a residential neighborhood and near at least one public school, the public pool and town playing fields – not to mention the municipal building ... and the routes those children and adults take to get to school, pool and town.

While many local residents find the First Aid Station to be an ungainly, large intrusion erected at one of the entrances to the town, the more widespread disapproval is focused on the refueling station. There are several problems created by placing it at the location on Mount Lucas Road.

But first, it has been acknowledged, by the mayor at least, that the town's decision process was flawed. It did not consult with residents, nor factor in any of the serious drawbacks, nor heed the recommendation *against* submit-

ted by the site plan review board – established to prevent just such poor decisions.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given this oversight, a number of problems have been raised by neighborhood residents that should have been addressed before final plans were approved – not in the middle of construction.

Those problems are issues of safety, traffic congestion, neighborhood intrusion of light, noise and pure ugliness, the reduction of green space and perhaps most concerning of all, health.

The issue of safety largely concerns pedestrian school children, their accompanying parents and bicyclists, heading to school, town pool, or playing fields, or to the town's center. There are now several more dangerous crossings that must be negotiated by those walking and biking. Acknowledging this, the town has assigned a crossing guard to improve pedestrian safety, at least during school hours.

But also, traffic at rush hour has become an intrusive nuisance that effects all attempting to pass through. Closing the Terhune extension to Route 206 added to an already difficult situation. And residents along Valley, Terhune, Mount Lucas, Cherry Hill and even Jefferson are impacted by traffic backups.

But the most dangerous impact of placing the fueling station on Mt. Lucas is – only discovered by some residents, not by the town – one of health.

Several residents discovered that health studies, by Columbia University's School of Public Health, the EPA and at least one other study, all warn of the health impacts, particularly to children, of emissions, some of which are carcinogenic. The emissions come from venting and the inevitable spills. The unhealthy emissions are produced primarily by benzene.

And yet somehow the town has placed this refueling

station *next* to its new First Aid station – exposing its employees and patients to those emissions. Clearly the town's review process was in this case non-existent.

Those same emissions can be carried by wind across the street to local residences. Will those residents be content to live there knowing this? Would they ever be able to sell their houses with that information available?

There are in the town several alternative sites. But the health concerns may be as prohibitive at those at Mount Lucas. And there are also lesser but concerning traffic situations.

The difficult reality is that re-locating the refueling station will require some flexible rethinking. Possibly the River Road site could be used for the larger vehicles that don't require frequent refilling.

Possibly smaller facilities could be located at several sites, including existing commercial gas stations. (There was the smaller site at Mt. Lucas and Valley used mostly for police vehicles.)

Maybe movable tankers, such as those that service many homes, could be parked in safe locations.

In California and some Chinese cities, all new large buses must be electric. Across this country, the next year or two will see many more electric vehicles of all sizes available. The town should look ahead.

With all the minds available in this town, some safe, healthy, non-intrusive solution should be achievable. But given the health and safety concerns, the traffic congestion and intrusions, along with the fundamental changes to the neighborhood, it seems that keeping the new fueling station on Mount Lucas ... is utterly indefensible.

Neighboring residents have murmured that should the station not be moved, they will have little choice but to seek relief by challenging the town legally.