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Teens form group to fight station's expansion

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MAHWAH – Teenage environmental activists are taking a stand against a plan to revamp a service

station across the street from their school.

Pilot Corp.'s service station, at 230 Route 17 south, abuts Ridge Road and is feet away from Mahwah High School. Pilot is planning

to erect a fence along the rear of its property to deter pedestrians from entering the site from the west, but some Mahwah students remain unimpressed.

Graham Starr, for one, said he is concerned about the proximity of the station to the high school. Graham is one of 140 who have joined the Mahwah Environmental Volunteers Organization, a grass-roots group made up mostly of students and led by high school junior Eric Fuchs-Stengel.

"Take into account what the Pilot station will bring with it," said Graham, a sophomore. "There's a mart; it's right near a motel. If you have a mart, with a gas station, with a truck stop, near a motel, chances are there's going to be some drugs, some illegal activity going through that area. You really don't want that so close to a school."

But Pilot attorney James Lott said his client's plan offers many improvements over existing conditions, including the elimination of 78 truck parking spaces and a 22 percent reduction in impervious coverage.

"Pilot's proposal speaks for itself," Lott said in response to the group's claims. "It is difficult for

me to respond to criticisms levied by people who have not taken the time to study our proposal."

Lott said he would welcome the opportunity to meet with members of the group or others who have concerns about Pilot's proposal.

Eric said group began taking shape in August, when he and a friend, fellow high school junior Samuel Berman, were hiking at Ramapo Valley County Reservation. Eric said he wasn't really into nature before he began to hike last summer but that he fell in love with the outdoors when he did.

"So I was at home, and I was like, you know, I really love the environment – that's really awesome out there," Eric said. "It would be awesome if we could help it and help protect it. And I called Sam up, and he was just like, 'All right, dude, I'll be down for helping.'"

Since then, Eric said the group has evolved into something more than a pair of hiking buddies.

In September, it helped the Mahwah Environmental Commission advertise proper composting techniques on Mahwah Day, and, in October, the group cleaned up land surrounding Winters Pond, collecting dozens of bags of trash

and scrap metal.

"The majority of the youth don't know the other side, and we discovered the other side, accidentally," said Samuel about his participation in the group. "It has definitely added way more dimension to my life. So, now, when I'm free on a weekend, I don't just have one choice."

Eric said he sends e-mails to all of the group's members informing them about Pilot's application, why he thinks it is wrong and what they can do to help.

"We had about 12 people show up [at a recent Zoning Board of Adjustment meeting], and they're all teenagers," Eric said. "I mean adults are there, too, but kids got active and went to this meeting – it's not the most fun thing to be at. But everyone sat there and listened just to prove a point and to help the environment in some way."

Eric and other members said they know Pilot is making an effort to revitalize its property with landscaping and a modern convenience store but that they would rather not sacrifice health and safety for aesthetics.

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