



Plofker seeks to build townhouses by First Congregational



Developer Steven Plofker has filed plans with the Township Zoning Board of Adjustment to build four townhouses on land now owned by First Congregational Church of Montclair. They would face Plymouth Street. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

By LINDA MOSS

moss@montclairlocal.news

Local developer Steve Plofker has another residential project in the works, and is seeking township approval to build four townhouses on part of the property owned by First Congregational Church of Montclair.

Plofker's company, Willow Street Properties LLC, has applied for four variances in order to subdivide part of the church's land, a vacant area that faces Plymouth Street. The parcel is in front of an accessory parking lot for the house of worship, which is at 40 South Fullerton Ave.

The Township Board of Adjustment was scheduled to hear Plofker's application, filed by attorney Alan Trembulak, at its meeting Wednesday night. But the matter was rescheduled for Nov. 8.

The Rev. Ann Ralosky said that the house of worship is selling part of its property in order to help fund its ministry and to pay for work on its building.

"First Congregational Church is a growing and dynamic congregation in Montclair and we take pride in the meaningful roles that our congregation and facilities play in our community," Ralosky said in an email. "We have the responsibility of maintaining a large, aging and complex building and have agreed to sell our back lawn parcel to Willow Street Properties to raise much needed capital to improve our physical plant and support our continued ministry work."

Willow Street Properties declined to comment.

The subdivision that Plofker wants would be 14,460 square feet, and the three-story townhouses were designed by Montclair architect Paul Sionas.

The variances are for construction of the townhouses in an R-1 residential zone; permission to have eight on-site parking spaces instead of the 9.6 required by town ordinance; permission for a rear-yard setback of 20 feet, 4-inches, rather than the 23.54 feet required by the township; and approval to have building coverage of 4,286 square feet rather than the maximum of 3,615 set by the municipality.

The proposed townhouses would have a brick veneer, chimneys and be situated as pairs, with two next to each other.

The project is one of several multifamily developments that Plofker either has under construction, has approval for, or is seeking approval for.

He [recently won the go-ahead](#) from the township to build a mixed-use development with 11 residential units at the former site of the Diva Lounge on Bloomfield Avenue. And he will be looking to construct [seven townhouses on Orange Road](#).



Historic commission readies recommendations on Lackawanna Plaza



LINDA MOSS/STAFF

The Montclair Historic Preservation Commission met on Thursday to draft its recommendations regarding the proposed redevelopment plan for Lackawanna Plaza. The members are, from left, Caroline Kane Levy, David Greenbaum, Jason Hyndman, chair Kathleen Bennett, and Stephen Rooney.

by LINDA MOSS

moss@montclairlocal.news

During a four-hour meeting, the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission on Thursday night began hammering out recommendations for the Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment plan, aiming to force developers to preserve the heritage and incorporate the “DNA” of the landmark train station into the project.

In painstaking detail, the commission discussed changes it wants made in the first draft of the redevelopment plan, which critics claim that as written will dwarf the station and permit developers to destroy some of the site’s historic elements, such as its former train sheds. The plan now calls for a minimum 40,000-square-foot supermarket, 350 apartments, retail space, parking and open space at the Bloomfield Avenue site, two parcels that span Grove Street.

At the meeting Carmel Loughman, a Township Planning Board member, implored the commission to carefully pore over the redevelopment plan and tighten its wording so that Pinnacle Cos. of Montclair and Hampshire Cos. of Morristown don’t have any leeway to eliminate any of the station’s historic elements.

“I view you guys as the guardians of this historic building. ... I feel like you need to be firmer, in my view,” Loughman said after hearing some of the commission’s suggestions.

Time is of the essence for the commission, because it needs to provide its input to the Township Planning Board before that body’s meeting on Monday. That’s because the Township Council fast-tracked the creation of the Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment plan, taking on oversight of the plan’s creation from the planning board.

The council wants the planning board’s recommendations on the proposed redevelopment plan, drafted by Phillips Preiss Grygiel LLC, in time for the governing body’s July meeting.

Commissioner David Greenbaum said that the planning board’s redevelopment subcommittee had recently met and found the proposed Lackawanna plan wanting. That subcommittee includes members of the HPC, the planning board and the council’s economic development committee.

The subcommittee looked to successful re-adaptive uses of historic sites, such as Fanueil Hall in Boston and the High Line in Manhattan, as models for Lackawanna Plaza’s future, according to Greenbaum.

“I think that’s the important thing, leveraging the train station both in its structural form and the idea of a train station, in the design DNA of the new development,” he said, rather than just envisioning Lackawanna Plaza as a mixed-use commercial property.

The subcommittee also discussed that if the developer was not able “to comply with this particular vision for the property, that perhaps it may be best if the town encourage another developer to take a crack at it who would be more respectful and mindful of the value of this historic asset in our community,” according to Greenbaum.

The commission's recommendations try to put teeth in the redevelopment plan's language, so there's no wiggle room or ambiguity that will permit destruction of the station's historic assets.

For example, currently the redevelopment plan says "preservation and adaptive reuse of historic features and structures on the site is recommended to the extent possible." The commission is recommending that the word "recommended" be changed to "required."

The commission also wants the plan to leave open the option of the project's supermarket, which will replace a closed Pathmark, being built on the site's east parcel, now a surface parking lot, "so as to provide maximum flexibility for preservation of the Lackawanna train shed."

The proposed redevelopment plan only describes the train stations as being listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Commission Chair Kathleen Bennett talked about the importance of the plan listing all the station's bona fides, including the fact that it is listed in the state's Register of Historic Places and its designation as a key building in Montclair Center Historic District.

The commission also wants more clarity in the redevelopment plan regarding TD Bank, which is not part of the redevelopment site even though it adjoins it.

"What happens if TD Bank decides that location is not viable?" commissioner Jason Hyndman said.

The commission also wants working changes on the redevelopment plans so that the station's existing masonry piers and steel and concrete canopies will be preserved.

And in another language tweak, the commission wants the redevelopment plan to say that the view to the station's former waiting room, now home to Pig & Prince restaurant, "shall be maintained," rather than "should be maintained to the greatest extent possible."

In addition to Loughman's remarks, the commission heard criticism of and suggestions regarding the redevelopment plan from two additional residents, Michael Peinovich and Frank Rubacky.

Peinovich, who lives on Cloverhill Place, said that the redevelopment will bring traffic to his tiny street and will threaten the very culturally diverse Pine Street neighborhood. Lackawanna Plaza is in the Fourth Ward, represented by Councilwoman Renée Baskerville, and some of its residents have been clamoring for a supermarket to finally replace Pathmark, which closed in November 2015.

"Renée has been seduced by the fact that there's going to be a supermarket [as part of the Lackawanna redevelopment]," Peinovich told the commission.

Cloverhill Place, which runs north and south between Claremont Avenue and Glenridge Avenue, has a neighborhood group that is working with a new organization in town, Vision Montclair, to fight several redevelopments, including Lackawanna Plaza. Cloverhill residents are going to suggest to township officials that either their street dead-end at Glenridge Avenue or be made into a one-way street so it doesn't get traffic from redeveloped Lackawanna Plaza, Peinovich said.

The commission was asked to weigh in on the redevelopment plan by its member and representative on the planning board, Stephen Rooney.

"I felt we needed to get into it right now," he said.

Hyndman volunteered to put together the commission's recommendations, incorporating the suggestions of Loughman and the two other residents, over the weekend so it's ready to be sent to the planning board in time for its meeting on Monday.

The Historic Preservation Commission will later draft a formal resolution with its recommendations to give to the council.



Vision Montclair group, fighting development, gets off the ground



Adriana O'Toole

By LINDA MOSS
moss@montclairlocal.news

Concerned residents have formed a new community group, Vision Montclair, that is circulating a petition opposing two controversial major redevelopments in the township.

The group has scheduled a meeting for Thursday evening, June 22, at 7, at 1 Cloverhill Place, which is on the corner of Cloverhill and Glenridge Avenue, said one of its organizers, resident and local real estate agent Adriana O'Toole. So far Vision Montclair has gathered roughly 140 signatures on the petition that was sent out by Beth Calamia Scheckel, another co-founder of the new group.

"I'd say that Adriana and I have been instrumental in organizing our own neighborhood group and trying to keep up the momentum, and then we recently connected with residents in the Cloverhill/Lackawanna area who have their own neighborhood group with a few community leaders, and it just seemed natural to bring ourselves together since we all are working toward the same goal," Scheckel said in an email this week.

Both she and O'Toole have appeared at recent township meetings to raise objections to two mixed-use redevelopments, one at Seymour Street adjacent to the Wellmont Theater and one at Lackawanna Plaza, the site of a historic train station and a shopping center that once housed a Pathmark. The projects, both on Bloomfield Avenue and proposed by Pinnacle Cos. of Montclair, have significant residential components, 200 apartments at Seymour Street and 350 at Lackawanna Plaza.

Vision Montclair's goal is to support "sensible development" and to rally opposition to the proposed redevelopments because of the traffic that they will generate and their impact on local quality of life, according to O'Toole. Traffic congestion in the midtown area is going to spill over and clog local streets, she said.

"We (the neighbors around Seymour Street) don't see this as just a neighborhood problem but something that affects everyone in Montclair," Scheckel said. "This is why we have come together with residents of other neighborhoods to protest these untenable developments. There are other groups in town with similar sentiments, too, like Save Montclair and the Justice Coalition (which is particularly interested in promoting affordable housing, which is a whole other unspoken issue with these plans). There is strength in numbers, and everyone's voice should count."

Last week the Township Planning Board, dissatisfied with what was presented, told Pinnacle to gather additional data for a traffic-impact study regarding Seymour Street. Scheckel was critical of the board.

"In our almost two years of attending Planning Board meetings, we have found that the board belittles and disrespects attendees during public comment, creating an atmosphere of intimidation," she said. "Their meetings ... often go on for five hours, with public comment sometimes starting after 11 pm. It should not be us against them. Because Montclair residents need to participate in municipal affairs but often can't within the structure of board and Council meetings, we hope that through this and other Montclair-first groups we can allow everyone's opinion to be heard and to count."

Vision Montclair also claims that township schools can't accommodate the influx of students these developments can bring, and that "Montclair is allowing Pinnacle to build on town-owned property."

Defending the projects, Montclair Mayor Robert Jackson has cited a study done by township planning officials that found that dwellers in new apartments haven't burdened the school district, averaging just six school-age children for every 100 housing units.

And Pinnacle President Brian Stolar said his company will be giving the township payments in lieu of taxes, known as PILOT payments, for both the Seymour Street and Lackawanna Plaza redevelopments that are more than the properties are currently generating for the municipality. In addition, Pinnacle will be paying to lease the Seymour Street land from the township, according to Stolar.



Planning board sounds off on council, rejects Seymour traffic study



LINDA MOSS/STAFF

Traffic engineer John Harter, left, and attorney Thomas Trautner Jr. were at Monday's Township Planning Board meeting on behalf of Pinnacle Cos. and Brookfield Properties.

By LINDA MOSS

moss@montclairlocal.news

The Montclair Planning Board on Monday night sounded off over the Township Council taking control of one major redevelopment project in town, and sent a traffic-impact study on a second project slated for Bloomfield Avenue back to the drawing board.

At a nearly five-hour-long meeting, outgoing Vice Chairman Jason DeSalvo and several of his fellow board members criticized the council for "fast-tracking" creation of a redevelopment plan for Lackawanna Plaza. That controversial mixed-use development is slated for the site of the shopping center that used to house a

Pathmark, which is also home to a historic train station, at Bloomfield Avenue and Grove Street.

DeSalvo described the council's action as a "joke," which if mishandled threatened to "bollix" traffic on Bloomfield Avenue.

In other action, the board also told the developer of the Seymour Street redevelopment, a mixed-use project with two buildings slated for the site adjacent to the Wellmont Theater, to revise and come up with additional data for its traffic-impact study for that site. According to testimony Tuesday, the project will increase traffic on Bloomfield Avenue and surrounding streets such as Roosevelt Place and South Fullerton Avenue.

The board wants information on the impact of the traffic created by the project - which includes 200 apartments, retail space, and a 7-story parking garage with office space - on Sundays and when the Wellmont holds an event, information that hadn't been collected in the report presented Monday by traffic engineer John Harter. Harter did the study for Seymour Street's developers, Pinnacle Cos. of Montclair and Brookfield Properties of Manhattan.

The board also asked Harter for what Chair John Wynn described as a "Plan B" if a major traffic-improvement project that Essex County has planned for intersections along Bloomfield Avenue never gets executed. Harter's traffic study assumes that the changes that the county wants to make will in fact happen. But the county is depending on a federal grant of \$4 million to \$5 million to do the work, and its application hasn't been approved yet.

"What I'm not seeing is a Plan B, because everyone is relying on something that you don't have control over," Wynn said.



LINDA MOSS/STAFF

Aerial view of the Seymour Street redevelopment site.

Monday's meeting was a hearing on the site plan for the Seymour Street redevelopment, which was continued until July 17. But one resident brought up the Lackawanna Plaza project, proposed by Pinnacle and Hampshire Cos. of Morristown, during the public-comment portion of the session.

William Scott suggested that the board take a comprehensive look at the various projects in development in the township when it considered applications, not consider them piecemeal and in isolation. Scott also recommended that the board move some projects along more quickly, such as Lackawanna Plaza, which will bring a supermarket to replace the Pathmark that the Fourth Ward has been lacking since November 2015.

But DeSalvo quickly interjected, pointing out that the council had recently opted to take over the drafting of a redevelopment plan for Lackawanna Plaza, to speed up the process, and then have the board just review it within a tight timeframe.

The process the council has chosen means that there will be little study or public discussion of the

Lackawanna plan, compared to the many hearings and public input the board would have held before drafting a redevelopment plan, according to DeSalvo.

“What I can say is the public cannot have its cake and eat it,” he said. “If you want the exhaustive process that we’re going through here [on Seymour Street], with numerous opportunities for public input, for thoughtful discussion, to hear all points – you cannot do that in 30 days through a referral process by the town council. That’s a joke.”

Wynn said that under the usual process, the planning board would have carefully vetted the Lackawanna redevelopment plan before it went to the council.

DeSalvo told Scott, “You want a grocery store and you want it fast, that’s fine, but you don’t get to discuss the nuances of traffic, you don’t get to discuss which tree goes where, how much open space there is. You get your grocery store fast, and if it bollixes up Bloomfield Avenue, well you got your grocery store, fast.”

Board member Martin Schwartz also commented on the “fast-track” route the council had taken.

“And if you don’t like the way it [the Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment] looks, you feel there’s too much volume, it destroys a historic site, tough,” he said.

Carmel Loughman, another board member, told Scott, “You’re making some very good points, but the council is where you should address them.”

During the portion of the meeting devoted to the traffic study for Seymour Street, Harter said the new development will increase traffic by 3 1/2 percent on Bloomfield Avenue, and that the residential component of the project would generate 100 vehicular trips an hour, minus 12 trips to reflect residents who use public transportation, on weekday mornings.

The development will alleviate some traffic issues, he said. For example, the part of Seymour Street in front of the Wellmont will be permanently closed to create a public plaza, instead of just being closed part-time when the theater has an event, providing “predictability” for drivers, according to Harter.

He also said that as part of the improvements that the county is planning it will install a crosswalk and traffic light at the intersection of Seymour Street and Bloomfield Avenue, a dangerous section of the street for pedestrians to navigate now.

The county’s other planned improvements, if it gets the federal grant it is seeking, include creating a left turn lane, with a left-turn signal, on South and North Willow streets where they intersect with Bloomfield Avenue, according to Gordon Meth, a traffic consultant for the county who also testified Tuesday. That area currently has a high incidence of traffic accidents, he said.

Data shows that in peak hours when the Seymour Street project is built traffic on Roosevelt Place will increase from 80 cars an hour to about 150 vehicles, according to Meth, which raised concerns from DeSalvo.

“I just want to make sure that we’re not turning this into what is right now a residential street into a commercial street,” DeSalvo said, adding that the original goal of permitting dense development in just certain areas of town “was to not negatively impact the residential nature of Montclair.”

The county is also considering removing the traffic light on the corner of Glenridge and Bloomfield avenues, permitting only right turns at that corner, Harter and Meth told the board.

South Fullerton will be one of the development’s three access points, prompting concern from board members and residents who spoke up at the meeting. They said that traffic on that road by the entrance to the Crescent Deck already gets backed up as vehicles try to cross Bloomfield Avenue, and that it would be exacerbated by additional vehicles coming from the Seymour Street development.

Meth said that putting “don’t-block-the-box” striping in that part of South Fullerton could help address the problem.

Ultimately, Meth told the board, even if the county doesn’t get the federal funds for the Bloomfield Avenue improvements, the traffic study and its recommendations would still be acceptable with “just a few modifications.”



Is Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment plan a rubber-stamp?



Deputy Mayor William Hurlock and Kathleen Bennett, chair of the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission, discussed the Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment plan the day it was released, Thursday, June 1. The topic came up at a First Ward meeting.

By LINDA MOSS

moss@montclairlocal.news

The first draft of a redevelopment plan for Lackawanna Plaza was submitted to township officials last week, and some critics are already claiming that the 92-page document basically rubber-stamps what developers have controversially proposed for the 8-acre parcel on Bloomfield Avenue.

The Township Council has sent the plan, which the municipality posted on its website last Thursday, to the Planning Board for its recommendations. At this point the redevelopment plan, which allows a mixed-use project with up to 350 dwelling units and a new supermarket to replace a shuttered Pathmark, is just a draft. It will be subject to public hearings and must be approved by the council.

The municipal website says that the plan “is the culmination of two years of planning efforts which included two public workshop meetings and several Fourth Ward community meetings where residents, local businesses, township officials and property owners expressed their opinions and concerns about redevelopment of the property.”

The plan was drafted by Phillips Preiss Grygiel LLC, a consultant, and it mirrors what developers Pinnacle Cos. of Montclair and Hampshire Cos. of Morristown have already proposed for Lackawanna Plaza, plans that the planning board, preservationists and residents have voiced objections to at various public forums. The main worries are that the redevelopment plan, with its two multi-story buildings, would dwarf the site’s historic train station, won’t protect other historic elements at the site, and won’t provide enough open space.

HISTORIC COMMISSION

Kathleen Bennett, chair of the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission, and Planning Board member Martin Schwartz both said that the proposed redevelopment plan is very similar to the developer proposal that was reviewed by, and met objections from, the board’s redevelopment subcommittee.

That redevelopment subcommittee will be meeting this week or next week to go over the newly drafted redevelopment plan, according to Schwartz.

“We’re looking forward to balancing a successful use of this valuable space while addressing the needs of local residents and respecting this important landmark and maintaining Montclair’s unique architectural quality of life,” he said.

The HPC will be discussing the plan for Lackawanna Plaza, now home to a near-vacant shopping center, at its June 22 meeting according to Bennett.

The redevelopment plan allows one of the most controversial aspects of what the developers are seeking,

namely several hundred residential units. It also calls for a grocery store, at minimum 40,000 square feet, as part of the project. Developers have been in talks with ShopRite as their anchor tenant.

“A maximum of 350 dwelling units shall be permitted in the Plan Area,” the redevelopment plan says. “A mix of micro, studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom units shall be permitted. Three-bedroom units may be permitted if required for compliance with affordable housing regulations.”

BALANCING FACTORS

The redevelopment plan says it juggled various factors.

“The plan balances the often-competing objectives for the area identified in the visioning process by requiring a new supermarket, preserving important historic resources, ensuring pedestrian permeability throughout the site, locating open spaces in specific locations, and providing residential uses that include an affordability requirement,” the redevelopment plan document says. “This plan envisions the redevelopment of the Lackawanna Plaza area with a mix of uses that enlivens the eastern end of Montclair Center,” it says. “The plan includes standards for high-quality, pedestrian-oriented design, while respecting the historic character of the original Lackawanna Terminal building.”

The redevelopment plan’s land-use goals are to: provide a land-use mix that results in a sustainable positive fiscal and social impact for the township; ensure that it has a supermarket; provide stores and services for local residents and workers as well as drawing patrons from the broader community; have plazas and public-gathering spaces; provide mixed, multi-generational housing; offer affordable housing, including workforce housing; incorporate historic elements; encourage shared parking in structures that are hidden from view; and create programmable outdoor spaces.

Lackawanna Plaza consists of two parcels, a 4.38-acre property with the shopping center on the west side of Grove Street and a 3.44-acre one on the east side of Grove, which is now an open parking lot.

On the western plot of land, the redevelopment plan mandates a state-of-the-art supermarket with modern amenities, and a food court or restaurants, as well as additional retail space, particularly for the historic terminal building fronting on Lackawanna Plaza. Developers must also “provide open space between the supermarket and Bloomfield Avenue in a manner that will preserve the sight lines to the historic train station,” according to the plan.

MULTI-STORY

The plan encourages mixed-use development, “with a maximum building height of four stories (five levels for a parking garage), that includes structured parking and residential uses above the new supermarket.”

The plan also mandates that “existing historic resources including the historic station waiting room building and station terminal facing Lackawanna Plaza” be maintained and protected, and encourages “reuse and or replication of historic features such as the horse water trough, the brick piers and steel and concrete awnings.”

Existing buildings that face Lackawanna Plaza should be renovated for retail use, according to the plan.

The redevelopment “concepts” for the eastern parcel include multifamily residential with a maximum height of four stories, above a parking level, with large setbacks from Grove Street.

For that eastern property the plan will also: provide on-site recreation; permit office and retail uses; provide enclosed parking for uses on east parcel and supermarket on west parcel; permit vehicular access from Bloomfield Avenue, just one curb cut, and Glenridge Avenue, up to two curb cuts; and eliminate vehicular access from Grove Street.

The redevelopment plan also set forth a number of requirements for parking at Lackawanna Plaza. Surface parking will only be allowed on the west parcel in the existing lot adjacent to Lackawanna Plaza and in some existing parking areas on the eastern site.

PARKING RULES

“On the east parcel, structured parking shall be located on the lowest level of the building and hidden from view due to topography to the extent possible,” according to the plan.

“On the west parcel, structured parking shall be ‘wrapped’ by buildings on all sides except on the south façade, which may face a courtyard enclosed by interior walls of residential buildings, and on the west façade facing the existing office building,” the plan says.

In a somewhat unusual move, Mayor Robert Jackson and the council took on oversight of creation of the redevelopment plan from the planning board in an effort to fast-track the process. Some Fourth Ward residents have criticized the length of time it is taking to get a replacement for Pathmark, which closed in November 2015.

The council has asked the planning board to review the redevelopment-plan draft at its June 26 meeting and offer its recommendations “as soon as practical thereafter to allow for the governing body consideration at its July meeting.”

At its last meeting the planning board questioned exactly how long it has to report back to the council, since under state statute it should have 45 days, which would give the board till August, not July. Planning Board Chair John Wynn couldn’t be reached for comment, and Township Planner Janice Talley said that the resolution “speaks for itself.”



Grabowsky to buy Hampton House building in Montclair



LINDA MOSS/STAFF

The Hampton House furniture store is closing, and Montclair commercial landlord Dick Grabowsky is buying it.

By LINDA MOSS
moss@montclairlocal.news

After 70 years in town, Hampton House, a high-end furniture store, is closing and Montclair developer and downtown landlord Dick Grabowsky is purchasing its landmark building on the corner of Bloomfield and North Fullerton avenues.

Grabowsky said he put a deposit on the building last August and now that owners Ron and Joan Fisch have announced their retirement he will be able to close on the property.

“We should be finishing the purchase shortly,” he said, declining to say what he is paying.

Ron Fisch said that the building is under contract to be purchased, but declined to comment further about it.

Grabowsky said he plans to do a major renovation of the 12,000-square-foot building, which dates back to 1890, leaving the first floor for “a quality” retailer or restaurant and making the second and third floors office space. The building also has a lower-level floor on North Fullerton, which Grabowsky said he may try to use for “a separate entity of some type.”

The improvements at the building at 467 Bloomfield Ave. will include a new staircase, a larger-capacity and higher-speed elevator, and an entrance on Bloomfield Avenue that will be “appropriate” for the second- and third-floor office tenants. Grabowsky said that the plans he has for the building are permitted under town ordinances so he won’t need any variances.

It’s a bittersweet end for the family-furniture dynasty in Montclair’s commercial center. But Ron, 68, and his wife Joan, 63, are ready to retire and spend time with their daughters, who live in California and Chicago.

“We just felt it was right,” Ron said. “We just never had the flexibility that we could leave the store for any length of time to visit. We just made a decision that that is very important.”

The Fisches’ decision to close their store also comes at a time when the retail industry is undergoing a huge upheaval, as consumers increasingly do their shopping online. And the retail-furniture sector has been hit hard, facing weak demand, with chains such as Dearden, RoomStore and Levitz Furniture going out of business, and Huffman Koos retrenching and rebranding.

“The whole retail business is different today, much more online purchasing ... It’s not our business,” Ron said, adding that he didn’t want to do that kind of business, impersonal and having to ship a lot of items.

“In our industry we’re a dying breed,” Ron said. “We’re the last of the the mom-and-pop furniture stores ... They’re [furniture stores] strictly on the highway and they’re chains.”



ADAM ANIK FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

Ron and Joan Fisch prepare for the final clearance sale at their high-end furniture store Hampton House, which is closing after 70 years.

Another issue, Joan said, is that many of the manufacturers they buy from make furniture domestically, and these goods are more expensive than the merchandise made overseas, turning away some shoppers. Hampton House sells transitional-style furniture, “more livable than modern and not so stuffy as traditional,” according to Ron.

Fisch’s father Carl, a former furniture buyer for Bamberger’s in Newark, opened Hampton House in 1947. Ron joined the family business in 1977, and said that the store has in some cases been serving three generations of families. The Hampton House property was the site of a general merchandise store opened by Peter Doremus in 1812. The existing building was constructed in 1890. In 1947 Carl Fisch renovated the facade of the store, giving it its current Art Deco look.

Ron Fisch said that people have come into the store to tell him that his father years ago would offer them credit, letting them pay just \$5 a week so they could buy furniture.

The Fisches earlier this week were busy marking down merchandise in their store, putting signs on the various sofas, chairs, lamps and other items. On Wednesday and today, June 8, they were holding a private sale for their loyal customers. On Friday, they will open the sale to the general public. They expect the sale to last

until the end of July, and have more than \$1 million in inventory to clear out, according to Ron.

The store also felt the impact of the trend of people today going out to restaurants to eat, rather than entertaining at home, according to Joan, so they aren't spending on dining-room furniture.

"We see more dining rooms that are the children's playrooms than a dining room," Joan said.

Hampton House has customers from not only Montclair but surrounding areas, including New York City, and has shipped furniture to Nantucket, Ireland and Singapore, Ron said.

Israel Cronk, executive director of the Montclair Center Business Improvement District, said that the retail sector is especially difficult for businesses that don't want to do transactions online.

"It's a tough lot with retail right now," he said. "If you're not being innovative with your retail, a lot of people are dying a slow death."

Montclair shop owners who are surviving were already in town before rents began soaring, have had success in other places and then come to the township, or have had success online, according to Cronk.

The Frisches always enjoyed being able to offer a personal touch and service to customers. For example, a Montclair family had bought a sofa bed a few days before Thanksgiving for their guests to use on the holiday. On Thanksgiving night, they called the Frisches to complain that they couldn't figure out how to open it up. The married couple left their Thanksgiving festivities and family to help out.

"We went and opened it up for them," Joan said.



First Ward residents sound off on development, township planners



LINDA MOSS/STAFF

Township Deputy Mayor William Hurlock, left, and Brian Scantlebury, the deputy township manager, address residents' questions at the First Ward meeting on Thursday night. The sessions was held at the Bellevue Avenue branch of the Montclair Public Library.

By LINDA MOSS

moss@montclairlocal.news

First Ward residents voiced their concerns on a variety of topics — including development at the former Warner Communications building, the redevelopment of Lackawanna Plaza and pedestrian safety by the Starbucks on Valley Road — at a meeting Thursday night.

Deputy Mayor William Hurlock, who represents the First Ward, had about 25 people at his meeting, the 17th he has held since elected in 2012, at the Bellevue Branch of the Montclair Public Library.

During much of the 90-minute session, Hurlock fielded questions about development, namely the Warner office building in the First Ward and Lackawanna Plaza in the Fourth Ward. Jennifer Haughton complained about the Township Planning Board's handling of developer Michael Pavel's application to increase the square footage for his proposed plans for the Warner building, which is on Lorraine Avenue.

"I think the planners have an absolutely wrong vision for Upper Montclair," Haughton said.

The planning board in a 5-4 vote rejected Pavel's request, and the body was scheduled to vote on a resolution formalizing that decision at its May 22 meeting. Haughton told Hurlock that the resolution was suddenly pulled off the agenda.

At the planning board's meeting its attorney, Arthur Neiss, said that Pavel was threatening to sue and the resolution was taken off the agenda so both sides could talk and try to reach a settlement to avoid litigation. Neiss also apologized to residents, including Haughton, who had showed up at the meeting to see final action taken on the Warner resolution.

Hurlock, who is a lawyer, told residents that as a council member he has no control over the planning board, and characterized the planning board's handling of the Warner matter as "absurd." He added that he had probably had 30 conversations with Haughton about the Warner building.

"I can't tell the planning board what to do, but as a lawyer, and as a plain little old citizen — not as a government representative — I would never in a million years make a determination or a decision based on someone might sue me later on, unless I know what I'm doing is illegal," Hurlock said. "That's different story."

In terms of planning, he said that when the town was working on a new master plan he had successfully championed against part of it that would have strained the First Ward's infrastructure.

"I beat the master plan back in the First Ward," Hurlock said.

Residents on Thursday also expressed their dismay at the proposed plans for Lackawanna Plaza, the shopping center that once housed a Pathmark and is also home to a historic train station. The plans include the construction of 350 dwelling units.

Kathleen Bennett, chair of the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission, was at the meeting and said that her group was "absolutely horrified" when it saw the proposed Lackawanna Center plan last month. Hurlock advised residents to write to the Township Council and attend upcoming public hearings on the project to register their objections.

When one resident asked why the council was fast-tracking the Lackawanna project by taking over drafting its redevelopment plan from the planning board, Deputy Township Manager Brian Scantlebury, who was at the meeting, responded.

He said the project had been discussed for several years now, with several "well-attended meetings" held on it.

"I've been kind of been there since the genesis," Scantlebury said. "This thing has been plodding along."

Hurlock started his meeting by asking residents to be patient about the "disruption" from the work PSE&G is doing along Grove Street, replacing a gas line that is more than 100 years old.

"They had a staging area outside of my house for about 2 ½ weeks where I couldn't get out of my driveway for a couple of days, too," he said.

That work will be done by August, according to Scantlebury.

As for First Ward roads, the township is in the process of getting blinking lights installed at the crosswalk by the Starbucks on Valley Road, similar to the one at Kings Food Market, and is also addressing some of the congestion with the parking there, according to Hurlock.



LINDA MOSS/STAFF

Gray Russell, the township's sustainability officer, at the First Ward meeting on Thursday talked about an energy-saving program through PSE&G that is taking place in 10 municipal buildings.

During the meeting Gray Russell, the township's sustainability officer, updated the group about environmental

initiatives in the municipality. He said that the “shredfest” that the township held a month ago brought in 6 1/2 tons of confidential documents that 500 residents brought in to be shredded at the municipal public works yard.

The township is also in the midst of doing an energy-efficiency upgrade to 10 of the 12 municipal buildings, changing them to LED lighting as part of a program with PSE&G, according to Russell. PSE&G will foot the bill for 70 percent of the \$200,000 cost, or \$140,000, with the township permitted to pay the remaining \$60,000, interest free, over a three -year period, he said.

“This will lower utility bills for town every month, by \$40,000 a year ... within five years we will be saving about \$150,000, over the next decade save about a third of a million dollars, just from energy efficiencies,” Russell said.



Debate rages over whether Montclair is being over-developed



COURTESY JOHN REIMNITZ

Montclair developer Steven Plofker is seeking Township Planning Board approval to repurpose the site of the former Diva Lounge on Bloomfield Avenue, building a six-story residential building behind it. His architect, John Reimnitz, presented a rendering of the plan, which would have retail space and 10 dwelling units. The project is part of the nearly 1,000 apartments under construction or proposed along Bloomfield Avenue.

By LINDA MOSS

moss@montclairlocal.news

Montclair is experiencing a commercial real estate boom, with roughly 1,000 residential units either under construction, approved or proposed for the Bloomfield Avenue corridor. And the question of whether these apartments and mixed-use projects constitute over-development has become a recurring, and divisive, topic

for local officials and residents.

The latest project was unveiled at last week's Township Planning Board meeting, when Montclair developer Steven Plofker presented his plans to revamp the former Diva Lounge site, renovating that two-story building and adding a six-story multi-family structure toward the rear of the Bloomfield Avenue property. Plofker wants to create 10 dwelling units, as well as retail space.

A day later last week, there was a contentious Township Council meeting where nearly three dozen residents blasted the proposed redevelopment of Lackawanna Plaza, where developers are looking to replace the closed Pathmark with a state-of-the-art ShopRite, as well as building 350 apartments on that Bloomfield Avenue plot, which spans both sides of Grove Street.

And the planning board on June 12 will continue its hearing on a site-plan application for the redevelopment of Seymour Street, the area on Bloomfield Avenue that's adjacent to the Wellmont Theater. The mixed-use proposal for that site includes 200 apartments and retail space, as well as a standalone parking garage.

Critics of these projects say that their residential components are too dense, and will bring newcomers to the township that will snarl traffic with their vehicles and strain its infrastructure. Development opponents also claim that the new structures will detract from Montclair's leafy charm, with its foliage and historic architecture. In the case of Lackawanna Plaza, preservationists don't want the site's historic train station dwarfed by the four-story structure that would be built beside it under the proposed redevelopment.

Development supporters dispute most of those objections. The developers themselves say that the proposed projects will invigorate the municipality and revive prominent properties that are vacant, and are in some cases local eyesores. The Siena complex on Church Street, on the site of the long-closed Hahne's department store, has contributed to the lively scene on Church Street, some argue. Montclair is already a white-hot real estate market, and the proposed projects will add to the township's cachet, according to some.

Mayor Robert Jackson said the township is not heading down the road to over-development or overcrowding.

"The sum total of those projects (being proposed) I don't think represents over-development," Jackson said. "They're going to bring vitality, foot traffic to our community. Once those are done, I think we're essentially done."

The mayor added that the township's population has been on a decline from its all-time high of about 44,000. It was 37,700 as of the 2010 U.S. Census.

"We used to be a much bigger town than we are today," Jackson said. "I don't see it ever getting back to that kind of number."



COURTESY JOHN REIMNITZ

The former Diva Lounge building on Bloomfield Avenue has a storied history, dating back to 1922, and in the 1940s was an auto showroom.

The Seymour Street and Lackawanna Plaza projects still need approval from township officials, so their proposed density in terms of apartments and parking could be downsized.

Jackson said that a middle ground will have to be reached for all the parties who claim to have a stake in Lackawanna Plaza.

"I'm just not willing to say that we do nothing, and let that eight acres within a 10-minute walk of a train station in the hottest town in New Jersey ... (be) fallow," he said.

Montclair-based Pinnacle Cos. is partnering with other companies in the redevelopment of Lackawanna Plaza and Seymour Street, as well as The MC Hotel that's under construction on Bloomfield Avenue. Pinnacle President Brian Stolar argues that the projects will be a boon to Montclair.

"The existing Lackawanna site has a largely vacant and obsolete interior mall, that had included the Pathmark supermarket and several vacant buildings on Lackawanna Plaza, along with substantial parking lots that sit empty," he said in an email. "Only the Pig & Prince restaurant is a viable, existing use."

The proposed redevelopment plan includes a supermarket, and residential and office space, with secure parking garages that incorporate "historical buildings and architectural elements," according to Stolar.

"The new supermarket will face Bloomfield Avenue fronted by a large, new public plaza," Stolar said. "On both weekdays and weekends, the neighborhood will be enlivened and activated, rather than the existing condition with no residents on-site nights and weekends and little commercial activity. The new, state-of-the-art supermarket will be in walking distance to many in the Fourth Ward."

Stolar also defended the plans for Seymour Street, a site that includes a vacant Social Security Administration building and two public parking lots across from the Wellmont Theater, which Pinnacle co-owns.

He said that the redevelopment plan provides "total replacement of all existing parking spaces at no cost to the township in secure, new parking garages, as well as additional public parking, a 14,000 square foot public plaza ... 10,000 square feet of new arts and entertainment uses to augment the Wellmont Theater, along with new vibrant retail, office and residential uses."

The township will be receiving Payment in Lieu of Taxes, or PILOT, payments from both Lackawanna Plaza and Seymour Street that are more than their current taxes, according to Stolar. And in the case of Seymour Street, developers will also be paying ground-lease payment to the township, he said.

But critics question and dispute the purported benefits of the two projects, and have expressed their concern, sometimes angrily, at a number of township meetings. Preservationists have been especially vocal, saying that the Lackawanna train station, a historic landmark, will be overpowered by the redevelopment. Fourth Ward Councilwoman Renee Baskerville, members of the planning board and the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission have voiced their objections to the plan as it is, as has SaveMontclair, a local citizen group.

“In a nutshell, yes, I do think it’s over-development,” Baskerville said. “And I’m concerned.”

While she’s aware that abandoned properties will have to be redeveloped, Baskerville said that she’s not comfortable with the density of the Lackawanna and Seymour Street proposals, particularly their impact on Bloomfield Avenue traffic.

Stolar said the Lackawanna and Seymour Street projects will include “better-controlled traffic patterns, street improvements, pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, walkways, plazas and signaled pedestrian street crossings that will counter the increased traffic and improve the safety for drivers and pedestrians alike.”

Baskerville also said that the developments pose troubling challenges in terms of their impact on rents, with the influx of new apartments prompting local landlords to raise their rents, which means less affordable housing. This gentrification is forcing long-time residents, according to Baskerville. Yet she said that she can’t get any traction on efforts to stabilize rents.

Montclair — with its arts, restaurants, walk-ability and train stations — is particularly attractive to millennials and older baby boomers who want to downsize and move to apartments from large homes, said James Hughes, dean of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University.

“Montclair has all of that, so it’s not surprising that there are a lot of development pressures,” Hughes said. “That is sort of a hot area of development today, not the outer suburbs anymore. So Montclair is feeling that. It’s not surprising that it is a change for many longstanding residents in their image of what Montclair is.”

But because land in the township has become so valuable, for a project to be economically viable it must have density, and multiple floors, to generate enough rental revenue to make it worthwhile for a developer, Hughes said.

Township planners have done studies that found that new apartment dwellers haven’t burdened the school system, averaging six school-age children for every 100 housing units, Jackson said. The 31 buildings four stories and higher in the municipality generate \$3.4 million in school taxes annually, offset by \$1.9 million in costs to the school district, with the school district essentially netting \$1.5 million, he said.

As to naysayers regarding Montclair’s development, Jackson said the town is “booming” and has the “the hottest” real estate in New Jersey.

“All of the skyrocketing metrics — property values, bond rating — are driven by what residents and investors think about Montclair’s future, not its past,” he said. “I’m an unabashed traditionalist but I view Montclair’s history as a springboard to an even brighter future rather than a ball and chain anchoring us to an idealized past.”



Residents blast Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment plan



Officials from two real estate firms explained their vision for the redevelopment of Lackawanna Plaza at Tuesday's Council meeting, disclosing that they were close to reaching a deal with ShopRite as an anchor tenant. Jon Hanson, chairman of Hampshire Cos. of Morristown, left, Todd Anderson, a principal and executive vice president of acquisitions at Hampshire, and Brian Stolar, president of Pinnacle Cos. of Montclair, were at the meeting.

DEBORAH ANN TRIPOLDI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

By LINDA MOSS

moss@montclairlocal.news

Nearly three dozen residents on Tuesday night patiently lined up to criticize the proposed redevelopment plan for Lackawanna Plaza, complaining to the Township Council about the project's residential component, sheer mass and potential to detract from the historic train station at the site.

At the council meeting, more than three hours was dedicated to the future of Lackawanna Plaza, the session kicking off with a presentation by the developers — Pinnacle Cos. of Montclair and Hampshire Cos. of Morristown — on their vision for the redevelopment of the shopping center that once housed a Pathmark.

Officials from those real estate firms later heard residents give a litany of complaints about the proposed mixed-use redevelopment: its density of 350-residential units, the four-story height of its two buildings, its parking garages for 540 cars, the traffic problems it may create and how it will impact the site's more-than-a-hundred-year-old historic train station, potentially threatening some of its architectural features.

"Don't let it go down on your watch," Kathleen Bennett, chair of the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission, said to the council. "This is your legacy."

At the meeting Mayor Robert Jackson fielded questions from a resident and two Township Planning Board

members — Carmel Loughman and Martin Schwartz — [about the local governing body's decision](#) to fast-track the redevelopment process by taking on oversight of the completion of a redevelopment plan for the property on Bloomfield Avenue.

Jackson denied that the council had “dismissed” the Planning Board, which usually is the entity that closely shepherds the redevelopment-plan process. The governing body is just setting “basic parameters” for the plan — a grocery store and some residential — “to move forward with some level of direction,” according to the mayor.

“To suggest in any way that this is somehow some usurpation of the Planning Board purview is simply patently wrong,” Jackson told Schwartz. “We’re giving you a very broad berth here to make comments and recommendations.”

The mayor also said that the council will be seeking feedback from the board on the redevelopment plan, adding that the board will also have to grant site plan approval for the final project. And both the council and board will hold public hearings on the redevelopment, according to Jackson.

Todd Anderson, a principal and executive vice president of acquisitions at Hampshire, and Pinnacle President Brian Stolar both addressed the council. Jon Hanson, chairman of Hampshire and a longtime adviser to Gov. Chris Christie, also attended the meeting. Stolar said that the redevelopment will provide “substantial annual” payment-in-lieu-of-taxes contributions to the township.

Fourth Ward residents have been clamoring for a supermarket since Lackawanna Plaza’s Pathmark closed in November 2015, following the bankruptcy filing of its parent A&P. The developers initially were looking to replace the path with an A&P Fresh, but that plan fell through after the bankruptcy, Stolar said.

And even after A&P’s demise, Hampshire still saw an opportunity at Lackawanna to bring in a large supermarket to anchor the redevelopment, according to Anderson.

“We’re in discussions with ShopRite,” Anderson said. “We’re actually pursuing and close to terms with them.”

But grocery chains like ShopRite are looking for up to 65,000 square feet, larger than the old Pathmark’s 48,000 square feet, and need a lot of parking space available, according to Anderson. To meet that requirement, the developers will have to build a parking garage and offset the cost of building that garage with the residential units, he said.

The Lackawanna Plaza supermarket will be 65,000 square feet, or 1 ½ acres, architect Dean Marchetto told the council. There will be three floors of apartments above the first-floor supermarket, as well as residential units in a four-story building on the east side of Grove Street.

Many residents complained about the redevelopment’s proposed apartments, saying the township is being overdeveloped with massive projects and is losing its charm.

William Scott pointed out that there will be 1,080 residential units in developments that have been completed

or approved on Bloomfield Avenue.

“The need for a supermarket cannot trump, no pun intended, the need for a sensible, historically accurate development that does not overwhelm the residents and the residential character (of Montclair),” said James Cotter, a resident of Cloverhill Place.

Councilman-at-Large Bob Russo, Fourth Ward activist Daniel Cruz and Israel Cronk, executive director of the Montclair Center Business Improvement District, all suggested that the developers consider permitting a temporary food market until a new grocery store is built.

Cronk said that for five months he has been trying, to no avail, to get permission from the developers to bring a temporary farmers’ market to Lackawanna. Under questioning by Russo, Anderson said that Hampshire will consider the suggestions, but pointed out that it does raise issues such as liability if there’s temporary use of the property.

The council has instructed consultant Phillips Preiss Grygiel LLC to complete a draft of the redevelopment plan by May 31, and on Tuesday passed a resolution asking the Planning Board to review that draft at its June 26 meeting and then make suggestions regarding it.

Jackson stressed that the council hasn’t made any decisions yet on the redevelopment.

“This is just a conceptual rendering,” said Fourth Ward Councilwoman Renée Baskerville, who has hosted a number of meetings on the redevelopment.



Town tries to settle possible suit, Plofker's Diva Lounge plans



Montclair developer Steven Plofker, left, and his development director, Kevin Costello, were at the Township Planning Board meeting Monday night. Plofker is seeking approval to add a six-story building to the site of the old Diva Lounge. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

By LINDA MOSS
moss@montclairlocal.news

Threatened with a lawsuit, the township is trying to reach a settlement with the developer of the former Warner Communications building on Lorraine Avenue, raising concerns from residents who live near the site.

In addition to that potential litigation, at Monday's Township Planning Board meeting Montclair developer Steven Plofker outlined his plans to revamp the former Diva Lounge site, renovating that two-story building and adding a six-story multi-family structure toward the rear of the property. He is seeking to create 10 dwelling units at the site.

Earlier in the meeting Monday night, before Plofker's application, Township Planning Board Attorney Arthur Neiss disclosed that developer Michael Pavel was planning to sue the board over a decision it rendered in March on his property at 237-249 Lorraine Ave.

At that time, the planning board in a 5-4 vote denied Pavel's request to amend his site plan for the building. He was looking to increase the office space on the building's planned second floor from 5,300 square feet to 8,971 square feet, nearly 3,700 more square feet more than the board had previously approved. The first floor of the building will have retail space, and the revised site plan would have entailed construction of a 37-foot rear addition on the property.

The planning board was scheduled to pass a formal resolution outlining its denial at Monday's meeting, and roughly 20 residents who live near the Lorraine Avenue building showed up at the session for that matter. But the resolution was pulled from the agenda at the last minute, to the surprise and anger of the residents, with at least some fearing that the developer might be getting what he wanted through a negotiated settlement.

"You guys are really jerking us around," Jennifer Haughton said.



About 20 residents who live near the former Warner Communications building on Lorraine Avenue were irked when a resolution regarding the project was pulled from the Township Planning Board's agenda on Monday night. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

Neiss said he was going to be talking to Pavel's attorney to try to negotiate a settlement of the case to avoid litigation and having to go to court.

"I can report as a fact that the applicant intends to file a lawsuit against the board's action," Neiss said. "There are discussions in an effort to address that ... and honestly and frankly, to see whether or not litigation can be avoided. It was determined that we would pull this from the agenda today and revisit it within the next session of the board or the one after that."

Neiss apologized to residents, adding "I realize some of you must be very frustrated" that the Lorraine Avenue resolution was no longer on the agenda. He added that it's the state's policy for lawyers try to settle cases, to unburden the crowded court dockets.

In other action the board began hearing testimony on Plofker's plans for the former site of the Diva Lounge night club at 369-371 Bloomfield Ave., which is at the corner of North Willow Street and has been closed for several years.

Plofker has submitted a site-plan application for adaptive reuse of the building, which dates back to 1922 and was a former car showroom, by expanding it with a six-story addition toward the rear of the property. The look of the original brick façade of the structure facing Bloomfield Avenue will also be recreated, according to Plofker's architect, John Reimnitz.



Architect John Reimnitz presented renderings of plans for the former site of the Diva Lounge, at the corner of Bloomfield Avenue and North Willow Street, at Monday's Township Planning Board meeting. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

At the hearing Plofker said he is looking to add 10 dwelling units to the site. The new building would have eight apartments, with another two loft units in the renovated Diva Lounge building on Bloomfield Avenue, according to Plofker. Of the eight apartments in the new building, two are duplexes with roof decks. Plofker is proposing to have 10 parking spaces, which would be on the first floor of the new six-story structure and would require a variance.

There will be four separate retail spaces at the site, with two facing Bloomfield Avenue and two facing North Willow, Reimnitz said.

Plofker's plan is for two three-bedroom apartments and eight two-bedrooms.

"That is the first I heard tonight that you're going to have three-bedrooms," Township Planner Janice Talley told Reimnitz.

She suggested that having the two three-bedrooms could impact the amount of parking required for the residential units.

While the front of the building is the former Diva Lounge site, the site also includes, on North Willow, which slopes down, an auto repair shop with a parking lot that is used for storage of the vehicles being worked on.

The existing building and the new one will be connected by a stairwell and elevator tower.

The hearing on Plofker's application was continued until the planning board's July 10 meeting.