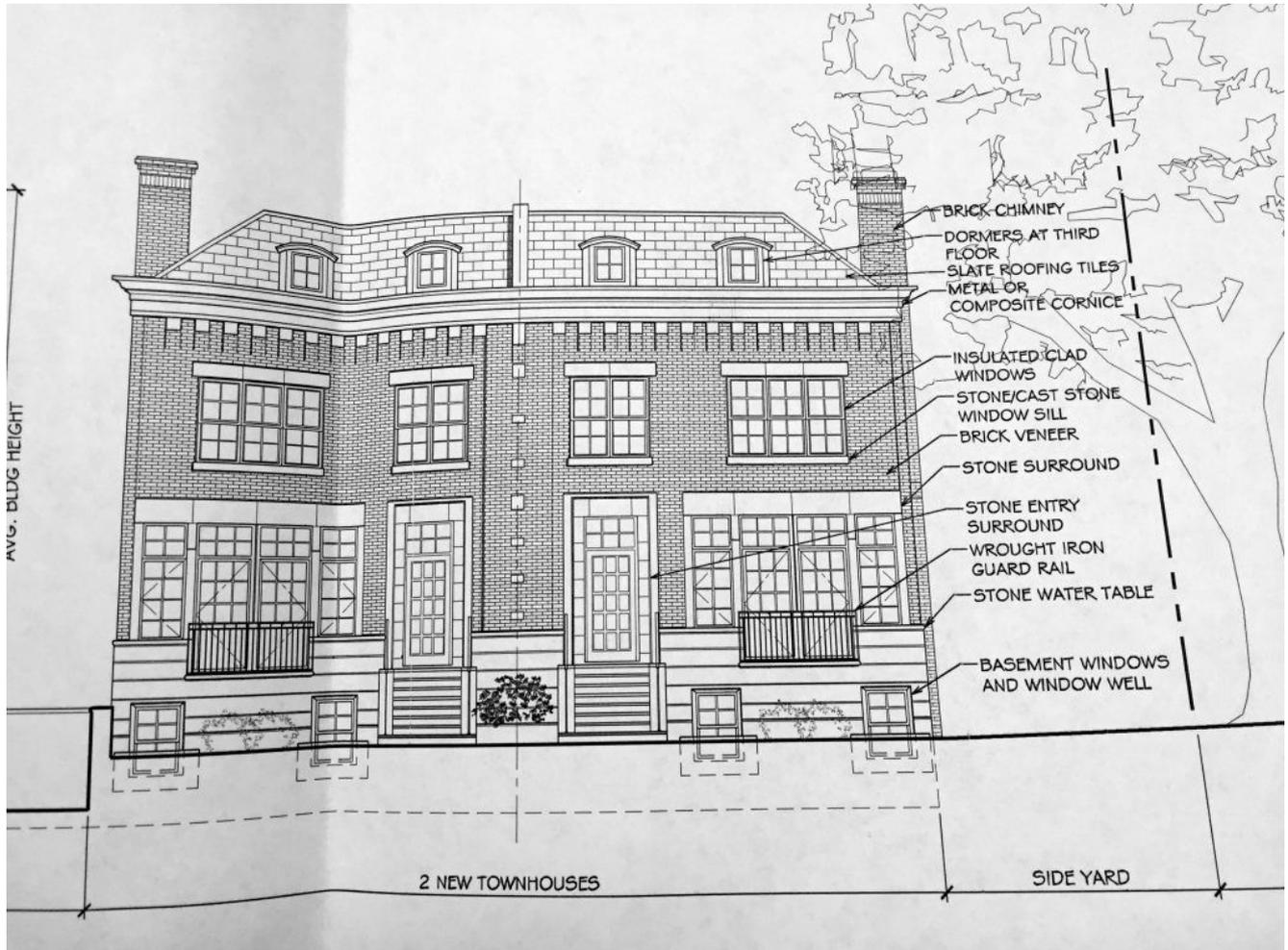


# Plofker seeks to build townhouses by First Congregational



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

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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](#).

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## **Planning board approves Plofker's plans for former Diva Lounge**



At a Township Planning Board meeting last month Montclair developer Steven Plofker presented revised plans for the former site of the Diva Lounge, seen from Bloomfield Avenue in a rendering. The board approved Plofker's plans on Monday night. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

**By LINDA MOSS**

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Montclair developer Steven Plofker won township approval Monday night to transform the site of the former Diva Lounge into a combination retail and multi-family development, adding a six-story building at the rear of the property for apartments.

At its meeting the Township Planning Board voted 7-0 to grant Plofker the four variances he needed to proceed with the so-called adaptive reuse of 369-371 Bloomfield Ave. However, in granting the approval several board members warned that this should mark the end of high-rise construction on or near

Bloomfield Avenue in that end of downtown.

"I think we're reaching the limits of the tall buildings in our downtown area," Board Chair John Wynn said. "We anticipated there that would be a need for this when we were doing the [Township] Master Plan, but it certainly wasn't anticipated without limitations. And I think we're getting there."

Board member Martin Schwartz also raised objections to the height of the additional building at the site, but noted that it was recently permitted by the township.

Both Wynn and Schwartz agreed that a mixed-use development replacing a long-empty building will boost the business district.

"The overall plan I think it is attractive," Wynn said. "It will improve the neighborhood. I'm voting for approval."

Plofker's project, revised from the site plan he presented earlier this year, calls for the restoration of the two-story building, constructed in the 1920s, at the corner of Bloomfield Avenue and North Willow Street that most recently housed the Diva Lounge night club. That building, which will be restored with some features like its facade brought back to their original look, has been vacant for about eight years. Plofker will construct a six-story residential building behind it.

The development will have 11 apartments in total, as well as 3,569 square feet of retail along Bloomfield and North Willow, as well as some parking. Several residential units will be located in the former Diva Lounge building, but most of the apartments will be in the new high-rise structure.

Plofker, who was at the meeting and was represented by attorney Alan Trembulak, received the various variances that he needed from the board. He doesn't have to provide a loading

zone on the property; he only has to supply 19 parking spaces instead of the 40 required by township ordinances; and he was allowed a six-foot rear setback instead of the required 10 feet.



At Monday's Township Planning Board meeting land-use planner Christine Nazzaro Cofone of the Cofone Consulting Group in Red Bank testified on behalf of Steven Plofker. She was the last witness called by Plofker's attorney, Alan Trembulak, right. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

In addition, Plofker agreed to provide two affordable housing units at another site near the Diva Lounge property in order to fulfill the township's requirements. But the Montclair Housing Commission will have to sign off on that.

Plofker also agreed work with the board's Revisions Committee and the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission on the

finishes for his development.

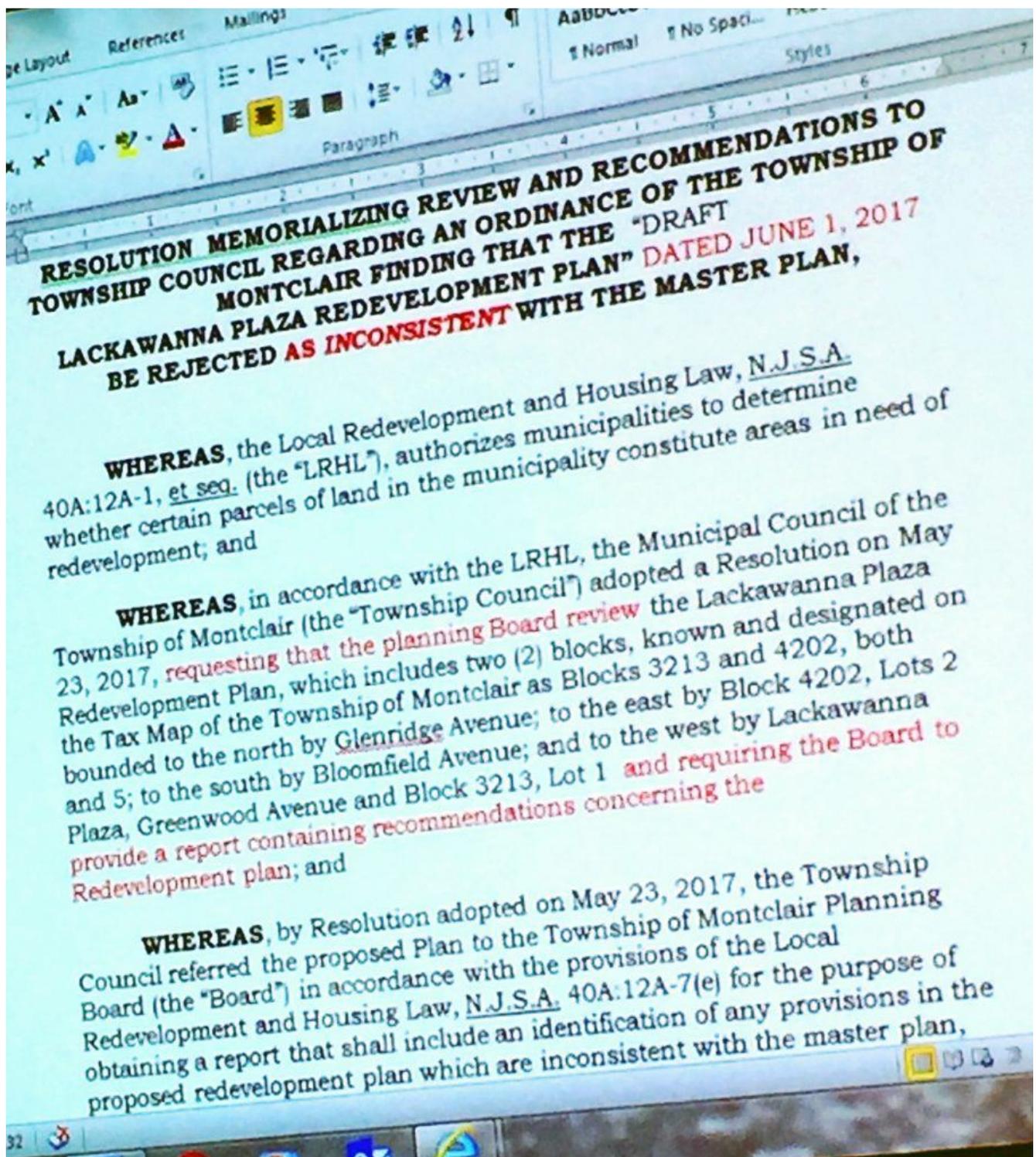
At Monday's meeting, the third hearing on the application, Trembulak called his final witness, land-use planner Christine Nazzaro Cofone of the Cofone Consulting Group in Red Bank.

Before the vote, Board Member Carmel Loughman said, "I think this building's exciting. It will bring a lot of attention to the area. It fits in with the other buildings being built. So I 100 percent support it."

Check back for more details on this developing story.

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## **Planning board challenges council over Lackawanna redevelopment**



The Township Planning Board finalized a list of 19 recommendations regarding a proposed redevelopment plan for Lackawanna Plaza at its Monday night meeting. Those suggestions will be forwarded to the Township Council. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

By LINDA MOSS

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The Township Planning Board this week threw down the gauntlet to the local council over Lackawanna Plaza's redevelopment, making 19 recommendations about the project and asking that the matter be sent back to the board, where it would normally be handled.

At a more than four-hour-long meeting on Monday night, the board unanimously approved a [resolution](#) that rejected a proposed redevelopment plan for Lackawanna Plaza, saying it is inconsistent with the municipality's master plan. Deputy Mayor Robin Schlager, who sits on the board, was among those who voted in favor of the resolution, and Fourth Ward Councilwoman Renée Baskerville was in the audience.

Those suggestions will now go to the Township Council, which took oversight of creation of the redevelopment plan from the board in order to hasten or "fast-track" the process after some residents complained about it taking too long. In recommendation No. 19 of its resolution, the board suggested that the local governing body kick the plan back to it for further evaluation.

One board member, Carmel Loughman, also said that under township ordinance the council must specifically address each of the recommendations, and why it is for or against every single one. The council must be held "accountable," according to Loughman.

She came to the council's conference meeting on Tuesday night, as did the chair of the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission, Kathleen Bennett. At the session, Mayor Robert Jackson said that he wants the council's Economic Development Committee, or EDC, to study the planning board and the HPC's very similar suggestions about Lackawanna Plaza.

"I think the EDC should review them ... and crystallize them and come up with some ideas," Jackson said.

Lackawanna Plaza's redevelopment has become a controversial

flash point for the debate over whether Montclair is being overdeveloped. Pinnacle Cos. of Montclair and Hampshire Cos. of Morristown want to build a mixed-use project – with a larger supermarket, 350 residential units, parking and retail space – on the site on Bloomfield Avenue, which is home to a historic landmark train terminal.

Critics of that proposal, which is embodied in the redevelopment plan under consideration, say that the development is too massive and dense, will dwarf the historic station and result in the destruction of some of its key elements. Proponents of the redevelopment are eager to have a new supermarket, likely a ShopRite, finally replace the Pathmark that closed at Lackawanna Plaza in November 2015, creating food scarcity in the Fourth Ward.

This week the board added a half-dozen recommendations to the original list it verbally agreed to at its June 26 meeting, when it first discussed its suggestions regarding the redevelopment plan written by Phillips Preiss Grygiel LLC of Hoboken, a consultant retained by the council. The board fine-tuned its list for the final resolution at its Monday meeting, acting on comments from several of its members.

For example, board member Carole Willis asked that specific language be added that 350 residential units is too dense and needs to be reduced, as does the footprint of the project. It was added. And following a suggestion from board member Martin Schwartz, recommendation No. 19 was added to the resolution, asking the council to send the redevelopment plan back to the planning board.

Recommendation No. 4, regarding the plaza in front of the former train terminal, was also tweaked to say that that area should remain “undeveloped but improved.”

The other recommendations in the resolution came from the June meeting and include: that Lackawanna Plaza’s historic elements

be identified; that the council get a legal opinion on whether it can approve a redevelopment plan that calls for the demolition of a property on the state's Register of Historic Places without state approval; that the plan leave open the option of developing the supermarket on the east parcel of the site, which is on the other side of Grove Street from where the shopping center and Pathmark were; that affordable housing be included in the project; and that the train station be the focal point of the redevelopment, integrated into the plan.

Loughman also said that a township ordinance essentially hold the council's feet to the fire in terms of their consideration of the planning board's recommendations.

"The council has to vote on each of our recommendations," she said. "If they disagree ... [they] have to state why they disagree and then vote on them. And a majority of the council has to agree to disagree with us."

That will help ensure that the council is held accountable for its decision on each point, according to Loughman.

Board Chair John Wynn said if the council doesn't follow the rules as laid out by town ordinance, it could be taken to court by anyone who disagrees with its decision on the planning board's recommendations.

"They would be wise to consider every aspect and do their job," Wynn said.

At the council meeting, Bennett said that the council shouldn't view the HPC as antagonistic.

"People are really interested in saving what we have here ... The HPC is not against development ... I just want to make that clear," she said.

Loughman told the council that residents are concerned about the redevelopment plan as-written.

"We're kind of catering to new people coming in ... Why does the town want to have this overwhelming, 350 units as the plan says, [project] come into their neighborhood?" she said.

But another resident, William Scott, said that the Fourth Ward is still essentially in limbo, without a supermarket. Councilman at-Large Bob Russo, saying he wished the town had made an effort to save buildings like the Marlboro Inn in the past, responded to Loughman's comments and those of Bennett, saying the council is under pressure over the need for a supermarket.

"I'm thinking very seriously about this thing: How we're going to deal with it, preserve as well as advance," Russo said. "This was dropped on us: a supermarket closed."

## **DIVA DEVELOPMENTS**

At its meeting Monday the planning board also heard Montclair developer Steven Plofker describe revisions to his site plan to build a mixed-use project at the site of the former Diva Lounge on the corner of Bloomfield Avenue and North Willow Street.

That night club has been closed at least eight years. The original plan that Plofker presented at a May board hearing called for renovating the two-story building that once housed Diva and adding a six-story multi-family structure toward the rear of the Bloomfield Avenue property. Under that plan, Plofker needed a variance to have 63 fewer parking spaces than required under township codes.



Architect John Reimnitz presented a rendering of Montclair developer Steven Plofker's revised plans for the former site of the Diva Lounge, as seen from Bloomfield Avenue, at Monday's Township Planning Board meeting. The new plan calls for more parking spaces, less retail space and one additional residential unit. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

But Plofker's attorney Alan Trembulak said the developer was eliminating some retail space, going from 6,754 square feet to 3,569, in order to create nine additional on-site parking spaces. So in total the revamped Diva Lounge property would have 19 parking spaces, according to Trembulak, and only need a variance for having 21 fewer parking spaces than required by the municipality.

Plofker's architect, John Reimnitz, testified that the revised plan calls for 11 residential units, instead of the original 10, so a one-bedroom apartment can be set aside for affordable housing. But Township Planner Janice Talley pointed out that Plofker would still need a variance for affordable housing,

since under township ordinance his project would require two such units, not one.

And following a suggestion from the board at the earlier meeting, Reimnitz said that the height of the project's staircase tower was dropped a story.

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## 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

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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.