

'Green' subdivision plan gets warm reception

Written by Kristyn Halbig Ziehm
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Developer's proposal for energy-efficient residences on Port's south side given high marks by design board

Port Washington developer Mike Speas on Tuesday proposed a "green" subdivision on the city's south side, with homes that would incorporate such features as geothermal heating and cooling, air-tight and highly insulated structures and efficient lighting and appliances — a plan that was enthusiastically greeted by the city's Design Review Board.

"I think the concept's fantastic," Fire Chief Mark Mitchell, a member of the board, said.

"I love it," added board member Brenda Fritsch. "I love the character. I love the boldness, the scale. I love the zero-energy ready homes. I think it's great."

The board recommended the Plan Commission approve a concept plan for the proposed Terraces at Mineral Springs, which would be built on about eight acres of land along South Division Street that's currently owned by We Energies.

Speas said he's been looking at the property for about three years, considering ways to make development work there.

"The city doesn't need another standard subdivision with standard lots," he said. "There are hundreds of those in the city.

"Green is the niche. That's what people want. It's just a whole new approach to building."

The proposed subdivision is made up of two parts, Speas said.

A three-acre portion of the property just north of Western Avenue would be a traditional development. Three large lots would be created, with houses built on the west end of these lots, away from the transmission lines that cross the property, he said.

"The transmission lines really dominate the site," Speas said. Because of the lines and the extensive right of way, the houses will be set back into the wooded area on the west side of the lots.

"You're not going to see them really from the road," Speas said.

The other portion of the development — nine lots created south of Western Avenue and just east of Modern Equipment — is where the zero-energy ready houses would be built, Speas said.

"The idea is to create homes that can produce as much energy as they consume," he said. "It's

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not a new idea. There are homes like this being built around Wisconsin, but not around here.

"We're looking at sustainability, at a great development."

The houses, he said, would be on 65-foot-wide lots. Stringent design guidelines would ensure that these homes would harmonize with others on the street and restrict such things as planting trees that would block solar panels.

"The idea is to have a traditional urban development," Speas said, but one that incorporates green measures sought today.

Like other houses in the area, these homes would be 1-1/2 stories, with gables facing the street and steeply sloped roofs that face north and south.

Speas noted that the houses would have similar shapes but with different embellishments to differentiate them. The design, he said, would be similar to that of the house he built at 120 W. Dodge St.

Each house would have features such as geothermal heating and cooling, a highly efficient building envelope and large windows and living spaces oriented to the south for passive solar heat.

The roofs would have the conduit and cables needed to support solar panels, Speas said.

The houses would also have walk-out basements and lofts that are unfinished, as well as spaces for detached garages and the potential for carriage houses or apartments above or next to the garages.

"We're spending a ton of money on the base envelope," Speas explained. "We want these to be affordable, so the idea is to be flexible. Maybe people can't afford to do it all at once, but over time they can add the solar panels, finish the basement and the loft."

A basic house is expected to sell for about \$200,000, he said.

"The city needs homes in that kind of price range," Mitchell noted.

Without the solar panels, Speas said, the houses will be about halfway to zero energy use. But once the panels are added, they will create the energy needed to operate them.

"If you buy a house for \$200,000 and you have no utility bills, that makes a huge difference," Public Works Director Rob Vanden Noven, chairman of the board, said.

The houses would also have rain gardens, rain barrels and shared driveways to minimize the amount of impermeable pavement, Speas said.

The concept plan will be reviewed by the Plan Commission on Thursday, Nov. 19.

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