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Concerns with aesthetics, building materials prompt Port commission to send project back to developer

The Port Washington Plan Commission last week put the brakes on a proposal to build an apartment complex on the city's south side.

Commission members tabled the concept plan for a 60-unit project, saying they want the developer to improve the aesthetics and quality of materials to be used for the five 12-unit buildings proposed at the corner of Sauk Road and Harris Drive.

Commission member Bud Sova was particularly outspoken in his criticism of the proposal, saying that when city residents were surveyed years ago, they said there were too many apartments in the community.

"We need to revisit that," Sova said. "It's something we need to do our homework on. There was a huge imbalance (in the ratio between single-family homes and apartments)."

City Planner Randy Tetzlaff noted that the city has come a long way since that time, noting that over the past 12 years, the city has approved more than 600 single-family homes and only 48 apartment units.

The commission previously approved a proposal to construct 150 units on the 10-1/4 acre parcel — more than double the number proposed by Premier, Tetzlaff noted.

"That doesn't mean it was right," said Sova.

The apartments proposed by Premier Real Estate Development are higher quality, Tetzlaff added, with amenities that include individual entries for each unit, laundry facilities in each unit, attached garages and cathedral ceilings.

Attorney Joe Goldberger, who presented Premier's proposal to the commission, said the units will rent for between $795 and $975 a month. Similar developments built by the firm have done well, he added, noting many are full before the buildings are completed.

"We've built these in other communities and they've been welcomed with open arms," Goldberger said. "This is a good project."

Premier has financing lined up for the project, he added.

"We'd like to get started as soon as possible," Goldberger said.

Commission member Amanda Williams asked for information to back up the firm's claims that there is a market for the complex.

“For you to just say, ‘We know this is going to be successful’ is hard for me to buy into,” she said.

The firm made changes to reduce the amount of pavement on the site and added some architectural features to make the buildings more attractive — changes recommended by the Design Review Board, Goldberger noted.

Williams also suggested the developer use color to break up the facade and bump out some parts of the exterior walls to add interest to the buildings, as well as consider creating a berm to shield the view from the road.

Goldberger said he would discuss the suggestion with company officials, but noted that the project has to be economically viable for the work to proceed.

“In the end, the economics simply have to work,” he said, noting that the cost of the land is high and the developer is constrained by infrastructure previously installed on the property. “At some point, the project simply becomes cost prohibitive.”

But Sova said better materials are essential.

“We’re going to have to put up with this for the next 50 years,” he said. “Just to jump at it because it’s something to build in bad times doesn’t make it right.”

Sova was adamant that the buildings should be downsized, saying the complex is along the city’s southern entryway, an area that should be kept as attractive as possible with buildings that don’t loom over the landscape.

“This is going to be larger than anything we’ve built in the last 30 years, except for the high rise,” Sova said. “These are going to be pretty massive buildings close to the road. They’re not attractive, aesthetically.”

But Tetzlaff warned that breaking the project into more buildings will decrease the amount of green space on the property, adding the city has worked hard to
retain as much green space as possible on the site.

The buildings previously approved for the land included structures that were two stories high and would have contained as many as 44 units — many more than Premier is proposing, Tetzlaff said.

That fact seemed to convince some commission members the complex is worth considering, although they asked that additional work be done to minimize the impact of the project on the area.