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Port Plan Commission likes idea of stores, condos in old, new buildings

A concept plan for the renovation of the former M&I Bank and Harry's Restaurant buildings in downtown Port Washington — including the construction of a new building between the two and an addition to the east side of the structures — that would create a multi-million-dollar retail and residential development took a step forward as the Plan Commission gave it a green light Dec. 20.

"I think it's a home run," Mayor Tom Mlada, chairman of the commission, said. "It's transformational."

Mlada praised the "dimensional" look of the plan, which calls for storefronts that are staggered along the street, as well as its integration into the existing streetscape.

"I like the fact it not only maximizes the views, but leverages the lakefront," Mlada said.

In its approval, the commission gave its nod to the proposed mix of five commercial spaces and 18 residential units with rooftop terraces and balconies that hang over public spaces, underground parking accessed from a lake-side municipal parking lot, an outdoor dining space on the northeast side of the site, a pocket park along Franklin Street and the use of 19 permit parking spaces in the marina lot.

It also recommended approval of the proposed building height of about 45 feet, 10 feet higher than allowed in downtown.

"It's verticality done right," Mlada said.

Although controversy has greeted a number of building proposals in the past that exceeded the 35-foot limit, architect Jorgen Hansen noted that Franklin Street buildings traditionally are narrow and tall, with 20 to 40-foot storefronts and two to three stories.

“It’s not that foreign to what’s happening on Franklin Street,” he said.

Adjoining structures, such as the Biever building across the street and the Boerner Mercantile Building northeast of the site, are 45 and 50 feet high, respectively, said Randy Tetzlaff, the city’s director of planning and development.

Another aspect of the plan that could prove to be controversial is parking, something the commission spent little time discussing.

City codes require 1.75 spaces per residence, and the developer said he wants to have two spaces per unit. However, the underground parking will only have about half the spaces needed for residents, Hansen said.

City Administrator Mark Grams said this week that although the eight points approved for the project includes reservations for 19 permit spaces in the marina lot, the location isn’t set in stone.

“We’ll work with them on it in terms of where those spots will be,” he said, noting they could be in any city parking lot downtown. “We haven’t really talked about where they would be.”

The city won’t just reserve the spots for the project, he added, noting permits will likely have to be purchased for the spaces.

The need for reserved parking spaces for the project is particularly acute for overnight parking, Grams noted.

While the Plan Commission gave its approval of the concept plans, there is still a long way to go before the plan becomes reality.

The Common Council is expected to take up the special exception permit for the building height in January, Grams said, with a public hearing tentatively slated for Tuesday, Jan. 15. Final approval could come as early as Feb. 5.

A final site plan for the project must also be approved before it has the green light, he said.

The project will rely on some tax-incremental financing district funding, but will add at least $2.5 million to the downtown tax base, developer Gertjan van den Broek noted in a memo to the commission.

If all goes well, construction could begin by fall 2013, van den Broek added.

Van den Broek told the commission the project goals are to bring vibrancy to the downtown by adding residents and shops, reusing existing buildings and complementing the downtown streetscape, further opening the lakefront and implementing sustainable measures, such as the adaptive uses for buildings.

The M&I Bank building would be intact on the Franklin Street side, but everything east of the vault would be demolished. The Harry's facade will be renovated and an additional story added.

"We're not disturbing the historic building facade," Hansen said of the M&I bank. "It's a perfect classical piece of architecture."

A new building that would extend along the east side from the bank building to the Harry's building and fill in the former drive-through would be created.

On the east side, the building would house condominiums. Each level would be set back from the one below it, a measure that will not only reduce the mass of the structure but also allow for terraces.

On the west side, the building would house first-floor commercial spaces with upper-level condominiums.

The new building between the bank and Harry's will have a traditional design and be set back about 20 feet from the other buildings, creating a small public space along Franklin Street.

The units inside the buildings will be flexible, Hansen said, noting that several can be combined to create one larger space.

There will be underground parking on the east side of the building, and the ramp will extend into the parking lot, Hansen said. Because of this and the fact that the electric lines on the east side will be buried, the building plans
and the city's planned revamping of the lot will go hand-in-hand, he said.

Van den Broek, who noted that he will now move forward with marketing studies and construction plans, said the design may be tweaked before construction begins.

"This is a design concept," he said. "There may be features that change."

Renovation that will create stores, offices in Boerner building praised

praise

Renovation plans for the Boerner Mercantile Building and the adjacent alleys and parking lot were enthusiastically approved last week by the Port Washington Plan Commission.

“It’s beyond impressive,” Mayor Tom Mlada, chairman of the commission, said Dec. 20. “It’s absolutely beautiful.”

Ald. Dan Becker, a member of the panel, concurred, saying, “It fits in great downtown. It’s going to look phenomenal.”

The building at 211 N. Franklin St. — the former Lueptow’s Furniture — is undergoing an almost historical restoration, said Randy Tetzlaff, the city’s director of planning and development.

The public has had a prime view of the exterior renovations as crews hired by building owner Daniel Ewig and his wife Marie-Ann have stripped away a facade placed on the building in 1969 and uncovered the original brickwork.

The new front facade will feature wrought iron columns, as well as cast iron panels below the storefront windows. Retractable awnings will hang over the storefront windows.

The entrance will also be moved to the center of the building.

“The idea is to really create a sense of place,” architect Mike Ehrlich said.

In addition, the exterior stairs in the alley and many of the window wells will be opened and a handicapped entrance added.

The windows will also be opened up, and the sills on many of them extended to allow more light to enter the building, Ehrlich said.

In the interior, the first floor will feature a large vestibule that leads to two retail spaces, Ehrlich said. Glass doors will lead to a grand stairway leading to the second and third floors.

The second floor will have three to four offices, he said, and the third floor is planned to be one large space.

An artist’s studio will be created on a portion of the lower level, he said.

The building’s original maple floors and pine tongue-and-groove ceilings are in good shape and will be restored, Ehrlich said, and the bricks exposed.

Outside the building, the alley will be improved. Instead of asphalt, pavers similar to those on the downtown sidewalks will be used to create a pedestrian walkway, Ehrlich said.

Wrought iron fencing and undulating green spaces will narrow the alley in parts, making it clear to motorists that it is intended for pedestrians, he added.

The alley will flow into two parking lots that Ewig is proposing to renovate.

In anticipation that a proposed land swap with the city is approved, Ewig has proposed redesigning the lot between his building and Associated Bank, adding a significant amount of green space and trees and narrowing the parking stalls to add more spaces.

On the west side of the Boerner building, where a private alley now runs, a 10-stall parking area will be developed by taking down the hillside and moving the retaining wall to a spot about six feet from the Vines to Cellar building.

Handicapped parking spaces will be placed in the alley, which will run one-way heading north.

A small area set off by pavers will be incorporated off Main Street, creating what Ehrlich termed an oasis where benches and perhaps a statue could be placed.

“We want to create a place for people to hang out there,” he said.

A sidewalk will lead through the new parking lots, connecting public parking off Washington Street to Main Street.