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Village awaits word on new plan for residential part of Highland Ridge that has yet to be built

Nearly two years after the Village of Grafton approved redevelopment plans to replace the former Manchester Mall shopping center, work on the second phase of the project remains stalled.

A delay in construction of the residential portion of the Highland Ridge project has also left residents and officials concerned about the appearance of the site, which contains vacant mall buildings, piles of rubble and construction equipment from demolition work started in summer 2008.

“We have received some complaints from residents concerned about the appearance and wondering what’s going on with the site,” Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said.

“The commercial portion of Highland Ridge has been completed, but it’s the residential project that hasn’t proceeded. That’s the concern right now.”

Highland Ridge, a $38 million project undertaken by mall owner E.J. Plesko of Madison and Residential Homes of America, calls for razing the mall and redeveloping the 22-acre site west of Wisconsin Avenue and south of Falls Road.

The first phase included constructing a 61,000-square-foot Pick ’n Save grocery that currently anchors a commercial center with another 11,400 square feet for other tenants. The second phase calls for 14.5 acres to be used for owner-occupied condominiums — 65 townhouses and 71 apartment-style units in 17 total buildings — that would be constructed over a three-year period.

Hofland said a development agreement required the developer to take out a building permit by fall 2008 for at least one multifamily building to mark the start of the residential work, which was not done.

“Due to the changing economy and the state of the condominium market, the project was put on hold,” Hofland said. “The developer indicated that they wanted to bring a new concept plan to the village.”

The agreement also requires the developer to meet deadlines for residential construction that will increase the property value of the project site. In lieu of meeting the first deadline, the developer paid the village $76,656 to cover the tax shortfall by a Jan. 31 deadline, Hofland said.

Village officials said they were told by E.J. Plesko representatives last December that a new redevelopment plan would be presented to the Community Development Authority by February. However, Hofland said this week that the village has not received any proposals.

Although the CDA is expected to meet this month, the earliest it could consider a new concept plan is in April, Hofland added.

When contacted Tuesday, David Gevers, director of development for E.J. Plesko, confirmed that his company is considering new options for the Highland Ridge project but declined further comment.

Demolition of the mall included the removal of several buildings to make room for the commercial center. However, the former Dunham’s Sporting Goods and Feed Bag Pet Supply buildings still remain, fronted by a fenced-off construction area where on-site crushing of demolition debris took place.

Hofland said the village recently received an inquiry about a demolition permit for the site. That permit could be issued by village staff, presumably for razing of the

remaining mall buildings to resume, he added.

“As part of the original development approvals by the Plan Commission, they were allowed to crush and shred building materials on site before they were hauled away,” Hofland said.

Gevers would not confirm if demolition work would resume in the near future but said crushing operations could not be done until the weather warms enough for the ground to thaw.

Until its closing in 2008, Manchester Mall was a fixture in the village’s south commercial district for more than 35 years.

After struggling for years to retain tenants, the mall lost anchor businesses such as Kmart and Kohl’s Food Store, which both closed. Kohl’s Department Store, the last anchor, moved to the Grafton Commons shopping center on the village’s east side.

In reaching an agreement with E.J. Plesko and Residential Homes of America, village officials touted the Highland Ridge project as a key redevelopment that would help revitalize the south commercial district.

VACANT BUILDINGS from the former Manchester Mall, piles of rubble and construction equipment have stood for months at the site proposed for residential use in the Highland Ridge redevelopment project. Photo by Sam Arendt