



## Plans for 'Promenade' heard by Planning Board

Wednesday, November 01, 2006

By ROBERT KOPACZ

SUMMIT -- The owners of property at 545 Morris Ave. continued their presentation on Monday, Oct. 23, seeking Planning Board approval for the proposed Summit Promenade mixed-use development. Approximately 20 residents of the surrounding neighborhood attended.

Jay Delaney, attorney for the property owners and developers, Diverse Properties, Inc., presented project architect David Minno to the board, who continued his testimony from the Sept. 25 session.

Presenting renderings of all four elevations of the proposed mixed-use building, as well as aerial photos and overall layout of the project, Mr. Minno continued his description of the proposed development and what he described as its benefits. The proposed facades were designed to resemble late 19th and early 20th century styles, reminiscent of many of the historical buildings of downtown Summit. The intention, according to Mr. Minno, is to create the impression of several buildings in a row built at different times, mimicking the look and feel of the city's downtown area. The project would feature, in addition to retail operations, a number of apartments and free-standing homes.

His testimony then focused on three zoning variances required for the project.

Mr. Minno noted that two four-foot-high signs are proposed at the northern and southern ends of the property on Morris Avenue. "We think that this is important for safety purposes, so that visitors and particularly delivery trucks can quickly find the property," Mr. Minno said.

Under present zoning regulations, only one sign is permitted, set back from the property line. If the owners were obliged to comply with the city's setback requirement, the signage would be "in the building itself," which would make no sense, according to Mr. Minno.

Mr. Minno described two additional variances requested by the property owners: A variance from the height restriction on the northern end of the mixed-use building, from 47 feet to 51.5 feet, and a decrease in the required buffer zone between the proposed building and adjacent homes.

Mr. Minno testified the height variance is necessary due to the natural downward slope of the property occurring at the northern end of the building, thus increasing the overall height in that area. Mr. Minno also detailed the reduction of the buffer zone from the currently required 35 feet to 27 feet, but added that the owners would add landscaping that would enhance buffering.

Mr. Minno noted that all three variance requests were within the Planning Board's jurisdiction.

In response to a question in the course of cross examination from Planning Board member Diane Klaif, Mr. Minno explained that trash removal would take place in a buffered area off the southeast corner of the building, adjacent to proposed residential lots. In a change from the original conceptual drawings, which showed companies such as Starbucks and Einstein Brothers Bagels as theoretical retail tenants, Mr. Minno noted that the retail space would not have any food service, thereby reducing the volume of trash, and particularly organic waste, that would need to be removed from the premises.

In response to a statement from Mr. Minno that the retail space would create shopping convenience for Schering-Plough employees who work on that firm's campus across the street, Ms. Klaif asked about the location of the nearest pedestrian crossings. Mr. Minno noted that the closest crossings were at River Road.

In a telephone interview, Mr. Delaney confirmed Mr. Minno's testimony on the subject of traffic that "all traffic issues will be addressed by the owner's traffic consultants at the next planning board session."

Several residents asked Mr. Minno questions about the property. Although their questioning was theoretically limited to his testimony, many used the opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with the proposed development. Don Nelson, a Plain Street resident who had previously sought conversion of the property into a pocket park at a presentation to Common Council on Sept. 19, questioned Mr. Minno.

"You say that this is a great transitional property," noted Mr. Nelson, referring to Mr. Minno's prior testimony that the proposed development represents a good transition between the Schering-Plough property to the west and the residential neighborhoods to the east. "Isn't greenery a better transitional property?" Mr. Minno insisted that the project is a "good transitional use."

In a reference to an earlier comment about the proposed buffer reduction adjacent to existing residences, Mr. Nelson asked, "Is it customary to use other people's property as a buffer?" Mr. Minno had testified that the reduction in the buffer zone would in practice not be a problem, insofar as the adjacent residences were located near Plain Street, at a considerable distance from the property's border. "That was not the intent of my testimony," noted Mr. Minno.

Mr. Minno had previously explained that only one of the houses on those properties stands close to the 545 Morris Ave. property line, adding that that house is not consistent with current zoning.

In a statement that seemed to express the sentiments of neighbors, one observer of the proceedings cried out, "That was the first building on the street, over 100 years ago."

The meeting was adjourned at 11:35 p.m.

Testimony on the Diversified Properties application will continue at a Summit Planning Board meeting scheduled for Nov. 27.

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