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REDEVELOPMENT

Yonkers Mayor Wants Action on Rebuilding

By **ELSA BRENNER**

WITH the first phase of a \$3.1 billion proposal for rebuilding Yonkers's downtown languishing before the City Council, and critics in recent months challenging another plan for high-density housing along a blighted strip of riverfront, Mayor Philip A. Amicone is growing increasingly impatient — and worried.

“They’ve been promising downtown waterfront development in Yonkers since I was a young man, and it’s been a long time since I was a young man,” said Mr. Amicone, who is 59. “Now we finally have people with money anxious to invest in our city, and we cannot afford to miss that opportunity.”

If approved, the \$3.1 billion proposal by Struever Fidelco Cappelli, which was submitted two years ago, would transform swaths of the city. For the first phase, which would cost about \$1.6 billion, the developers propose uncovering a section of the Saw Mill River paved over during the early 20th century for factories. The plans also call for building stores, condominiums, a minor league baseball park, parking garages and a movie theater.

But the developers have vowed to take their investment dollars elsewhere if the City Council continues to stall on accepting a draft environmental impact statement.

The most recent cause for Mr. Amicone's concern is opposition to a proposal for 18 residential towers in a 112-acre industrial zone along 1.25 miles of the Hudson River. Revision of the city's master plan for that area also calls for 13 acres of new parkland.

In opposing the plan, Scenic Hudson, a Poughkeepsie-based environmental group, advocates more parkland and fewer residences. In particular, the group objects to the tall buildings, saying they would obscure views of the river. It also says the public has not been given sufficient time to comment, and wants to extend the Feb. 20 deadline.

“What’s the rush?” asked Steve Rosenberg, a senior vice president of Scenic Hudson.

But Mr. Amicone's memory reaches far back. “I can recall half a dozen proposals in the past that never went through because everyone dragged their feet, and the developers went away,” he said.

That could happen again, according to a developer who hopes to build along Alexander Street, the strip bordering the Hudson.

Robert MacFarlane, chief executive of Homes for America Holdings, a real estate investment and operating firm based in Yonkers, bought 16 acres along Alexander Street in 2004 for \$40 million and has spent \$33 million to remediate surrounding brownfields, which contain asbestos, oil-based products and PCBs.

The company wants to build 100,000 square feet of commercial and retail space, as well as 1,100 residential units — a mix of town houses and high-rises — on the site, where Phelps Dodge once manufactured underwater cables.

If critics of the Alexander Street rezoning effort win out and the new master plan is not approved, Mr. MacFarlane said, he will leave the project behind and sell the property for its “highest and best use,” which could include a scrap metal junkyard.

While Scenic Hudson does not support the present Alexander Street proposal, another environmental group enthusiastically backs Yonkers’s efforts to refashion the former industrial city. Marcia Bystryn, the executive director of the New York League of Conservation Voters, said that although her organization had not taken an official position on the different proposals, “we’re very interested in Yonkers’s development.”

Ms. Bystryn said the Alexander Street proposal would infuse the greater New York area with much-needed middle-income housing and provide a densely populated, transit-oriented residential area close to a Metro-North Railroad station.

“This kind of new development is very controversial with some environmental groups,” she said. “But the perspective of the league is broader. We’re looking at an opportunity to convert brownfields, space that is useless to the public now, to housing. And that’s a lot better than using undeveloped green spaces for that purpose.”

Mayor Amicone said that if the City Council does not move quickly to take advantage of the proposals that developers are offering, an editorial published in the local Herald Statesman 53 years ago would still apply. It said: “No longer can Yonkers sit back smugly and watch the deterioration. If we do not proceed and progress, we retrogress and we shall die.”

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