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Build it
Little dissent heard for Yonkers redevelopment

By JOHN GOLDEN



The \$1.5 million redevelopment project in downtown Yonkers proposed by the city's master developer received an outpouring of public support last week as a civic boon that will bring thousands of jobs, millions in annual tax revenue and economic vitality to a city that urgently needs all of those.

Yet some of that support, voiced at a packed City Council hearing that left hundreds standing to listen through a sound system in halls outside the council chamber or watching the televised proceedings from a nearby courtroom, was qualified by repeatedly stated concerns that "the little guy" will be displaced and deprived of a fair share of the project's benefits and that affordable housing for low-income residents is not included in the plans by Struever Fidelco Cappelli L.L.C.

One of the city's larger employers in one of its oldest plants on the waterfront, American Sugar Refining Inc., raised a roadblock to supporters' push for the city's speedy approval of the project when company officials worried the plant might not make a "good neighbor" for new high-rise residents at Palisades Point, who might not be sweet on the smells and noise emitted from the refinery. They asked for a one-month extension of the project's public comment period. That would take that process into mid-June and give the company's consultants time to work out concerns with consultants for Struever Fidelco Cappelli, said Joseph A. DiSalvo, the Bronxville attorney representing the sugar refiner.

"ASR does not oppose this project provided this also allows for ASR's continued operation of the refinery," DiSalvo said.

City Council President Chuck Lesnick later said the comment period, previously scheduled to end May 13 with a second public hearing at Roosevelt High School, will be extended to May 30. "I'm hoping that that's fine with the sugar people," he said.

"They're clearly a water-dependent operation so they need to be on the waterfront," Lesnick said. "And we want them there."

Lesnick said he had not been aware earlier of the company's concerns. The Palisades Point property has been zoned for residential reuse for "dozens of years," he noted, and the specifics of the SFC proposal for the site have been discussed for two years without comment from refinery officials.

Peter G. Klein, SFC project manager in Yonkers, said the development partners did know of the company's concerns before the Tuesday night hearing. "It is something we were aware of and we met with them over the last two years," he said. He said the developers "are disappointed" with the council's decision to grant an extension.

"In redevelopment, you commonly see new residences on former industrial sites," Klein said. "We think our neighbors are going to be fine."

Of the 72 speakers at the hearing, Lesnick said, "well over half" were unequivocally in favor of the project and wanted it moved forward "with all due speed."

"Probably twice as many people urged us to move forward quickly, but nobody really seemed concerned about the extra two weeks here" with the extension, he said.

Among those urging speedy approval was Yonkers Chamber of Commerce President Kevin T. Cacace. The chamber and other business district groups have been critical of the council's handling of the project, especially in a volatile economy where lenders and the developer too might lose interest in investing in Yonkers.

"The project has gone slowly," Cacace said at the hearing. "It needs to go more quickly. ... Roll up your sleeves and let's get this project approved hopefully in the next few months."

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Other speakers, though, urged caution in moving ahead until community concerns, especially those of low-income residents, were addressed by SFC. "Please do keep in mind the little guy," one speaker urged, sounding an oft-voiced theme at the hearing.

Sounding another oft-voiced petition, Vernon Brinkley, community development director at the nonprofit Groundwork Yonkers, said the Yonkers Alliance for Community Benefits wants to negotiate an agreement with SFC before the project is approved. The agreement would legally bind the developer to commitments that address community needs and concerns. Brinkley said while the alliance understood the need for financial incentives to SFC to spur redevelopment, those incentives allowed the community "to ask for much more in return."

"Displacement is a very real concern," Brinkley said. "These issues aren't going to go away. These issues have to be addressed."

Lesnick said most council members "support the idea of community benefits. But we're sort of in the dark here because we don't know what community benefits they're asking for."

At SFC, Klein said that in meetings with Yonkers Alliance members, "They've not shared anything specific" about benefits they seek.

"We're committed to improving Yonkers both as a place to live and to work for new and existing residents," Klein said. "We're willing to work with any planning group that wants to meet."

Responding to criticism by members of Community Voices Heard, a group of low-income activists, and other speakers that SFC failed to include low-income housing in its two River Park Center towers at Getty Square and at Palisades Point, Klein said, "The Yonkers downtown needs to have a mix of housing. Right now there's a lack of market-rate housing to support the community as a whole. We will work with the council to make sure our project assures an adequate amount of affordable housing."

Among the city's small-business owners urging a quick passage for the SFC project was Jacqueline Bouet, owner of The Loft Dance and Fitness at 92 Main St. "I am desperate for this project to get under way," she told the council. "My business is suffering dramatically."

Bouet moved from Manhattan to Yonkers four years ago, led by the promise and prospect of a revitalized city. She said she personally invested more than \$500,000 and much of her own physical labor to open her dance and fitness center in a 5,200-square-foot space two years ago.

Unlike the vision of a transformed downtown that brought her here, "This is no neighborhood," she said. "We have a transient hub where people move in from Manhattan for a few months, maybe for a year, and then they move out again because we have no amenities here."

"Without the development I will have to leave," she said outside the hearing. "I can't afford to infuse cash unto my business every month. It's not paying the bills here."

"I need to just know that in three months it's going to come," she said of the SFC project. "To make some profits and make up my loss, it's going to take that kind of development."

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