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Yonkers debates future of downtown

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YONKERS - Donna Nolan moved to Yonkers when she was 2 and has lived there ever since, graduating from the city's public schools, getting married and raising four boys.

Michelle Jacobs moved to Yonkers from Brooklyn in 1990 and said she never wants to live anywhere else.

Both women love Yonkers but have very different views about what the Struever Fidelco Cappelli plan - a \$1.6 billion redevelopment and new heart for the city's downtown - would mean for it.

Nolan sees the project reviving a long-downtrodden city, providing jobs, shopping and excitement - something so lacking that when relatives from Ireland visit, she takes them to see New York City instead.

Nolan points to towers rising in White Plains and New Rochelle and asks why shouldn't Yonkers, Westchester's biggest city, enjoy the same. She also cites the benefits of new Hudson River access that has been created by already-completed development projects along the city's waterfront.

"Why shouldn't there be more? Why shouldn't we have that ballpark?" Nolan said. "If you can take your family down to your own city and watch your own team, that's fun. Or go down by the water and have lunch and shop. Why should I have to leave my beautiful city when I could have all of that here?"

But where Nolan sees a vibrant heart, Jacobs sees something else: a concrete, steel and glass transplant that she said is suited more to White Plains, New Rochelle or Manhattan than the brick and stone of a historic Hudson River city.

And while some worry the city has been passed over by developers too many times to let this chance slip away, Jacobs said Yonkers has too much to offer for developers to ignore it any more.

Jacobs questions who would buy the planned luxury apartments atop a shopping center and next to the ballpark. And she worries that the shopping and entertainment complex at SFC's centerpiece project, River Park Center, just east of City Hall, would come on top of a major shopping complex at Ridge Hill now under construction and a rebuilt Cross County Shopping Center.

"Where are all these shoppers going to come from?" Jacobs asked.

The women were just two of the more than 70 voices heard last week at the second of two public hearings on the project's draft environmental impact statement. A majority of the speakers backed the plan, but some of them also raised concerns over specific issues.

The public conversation continues over the SFC plan.

The proposal includes River Park Center, an 11-story parking, shopping and entertainment complex

topped by two 50-story apartment towers and a minor-league baseball stadium; Palisades Point, two 25-story apartment buildings on the Hudson River; and the Cacace Center, which would have a hotel and house municipal offices and a new fire headquarters.

Such conversation is often shaped by the participants' experiences in Yonkers, a city whose downtown saw a decline that began in the years after World War II, despite a succession of failed efforts to revive it.

Shelley Weintraub said the downtown's current revival, which began in the late 1990s, has been painfully slow. A vice president for the Greyston Foundation, which serves the city's poor with a combination of profit-making and charitable operations, Weintraub said the delays set back an affordable-housing program for artists opened by the foundation in 2001.

Originally, 22 of the 28 studio apartments at Greyston's historic Phillipsburgh Hall were rented to artists who came from New York City and across the country.

"You were able to walk the halls and hear a violin concerto, a pianist playing and then a trombonist. It was really wonderful," said Weintraub, who has worked for Greyston for 10 years and called Yonkers home for nine.

But within two or three years, 14 of the artists had moved out, Weintraub said, because the downtown was too desolate - lacking in stores, cafes and restaurants that the residents had hoped would soon follow.

Since then, a few restaurants have sprouted along lower Main Street down to the waterfront, Weintraub acknowledged. Still, she said, the downtown needs a bigger boost - something that would be provided by an influx of businesses and residents brought by SFC.

Deane Prouty, a percussionist who plays at Radio City Music Hall and at Broadway shows, moved with his wife six years ago to Yonkers' Park Hill section, drawn by its hilly, wooded terrain and affordable yet distinctive homes. Since then, he has come to appreciate much of the city's historic architecture.

"When you move to a place, you hope it is going to get better, and I think Yonkers could be a better place," Prouty said.

Prouty said the SFC development is too big and is out of character with Yonkers. He said he fears the shopping complex could prove a drain on city resources, rather than a source of revenue for the city's financially needy school district. And since major infrastructure improvements needed for River Park Center would be paid off through future property-tax revenue, Prouty questioned how much revenue would be left for the city, especially if the project is not an immediate success.

Rather than high-rises, Prouty said, the downtown would be better served by sticking to the city's 1998 development plan, which limited building heights along the waterfront and produced a series of eight- to 14-story buildings by Collins Enterprises north of the City Pier.

For Carmen Gomez Goldberg, who has lived in Yonkers for 22 years, SFC would bring opportunity to the city in general, and to Latinos specifically.

"There will be offices and retail space that will mean jobs and opportunities. We need jobs in Yonkers. There aren't enough jobs here," she said. She heads the Yonkers Federation of Hispanic Chambers of Commerce and is president of the Yonkers Puerto Rican Hispanic Parade.

Besides a chance for residents to see baseball, the stadium would serve as an important venue for cultural events, she said.

She envisioned relocating a festival that follows the annual parade from the municipal parking lot at Chicken Island to the stadium, a more fitting venue where participants could sit and enjoy music.

She said she thought much of the opposition to SFC results from a fear of change.

"I understand that people have concerns," she said, "but I think once it gets under way and people see it beautifies our city and makes it better, they will feel different about it."
