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## Developer alters housing portion of Yonkers plan

By JOHN GOLDEN

Despite concern and warnings that the city's slow approval process and an ailing economy could combine to kill their project, partners in the proposed \$1.6 billion redevelopment of downtown Yonkers still hope to break ground there by the end of the year.

But the partners' new position on affordable housing within the mixed-use development – a dominant concern of low-income residents and community action groups at public hearings on the project – is not negotiable, a top executive for the partnership said last week. SFC wants to build those units, about 70 to 75, apart from its four high-rise residences proposed for the riverfront and near Getty Square and also set aside rent subsidies for an equal number of units for tenants in existing housing in the downtown area.

Meanwhile, a Republican on the Yonkers City Council accused the council's Democratic leadership of "failing the citizens of Yonkers" by allowing the SFC project to languish "with no end to the approval process in sight." Councilman John M. Murtagh, a declared candidate for the Democrat-held 35th District seat in the State Senate, urged the council to adopt a "reasonable but strict timetable" for the various approvals needed before construction can begin at the proposed River Park Center near Getty Square.

"We do have a time frame," City Council President Chuck Lesnick countered his critic last week. Murtagh in his recent press release said Lesnick has shown "an utter inability to make any semblance of substantive progress whatsoever" on what would be the largest redevelopment project in city history.

Lesnick said planning consultants for SFC and the city "are knee-deep in comments" received by late May from interested parties on SFC's draft environmental impact statement, which was submitted to the city a year ago. He said the council could approve a final environmental impact statement by early October, as SFC officials have urged. Still, "If we don't have four or five votes" for the project, "then it doesn't matter" if that timeline is met.

Lesnick said the council's process "has been open. It's been transparent. It's been structured. It's been time-sensitive. It has not extended the project one extra minute. We're actively working to try to get final approval."

Joseph V. Apicella, senior vice president at Cappelli Enterprises Inc. and the partners' executive project manager in Yonkers, last week said SFC hoped to have final project approvals from the council by Nov. 25. "That is our Super Tuesday," he said. "Hopefully by the end of the year we can have a groundbreaking."

Lesnick indicated much remains to be settled before then, including project financing.

Affordable housing looms as another unresolved issue and potential obstacle to construction. Lesnick said he was "quite surprised" to hear at a recent meeting of the council real estate committee that SFC "is going to back away from its commitment to affordable housing."

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SFC had proposed to build 6 percent of dwelling units as affordable housing for qualified residents. Preliminary plans include a total of nearly 1,400 housing units at Palisades Point on the riverfront and Chicken Island, though Apicella said 1,500 units could be built.

Lesnick said he hoped to reach an agreement with SFC that 10 percent to 13 percent of total units would be affordable housing. Another major mixed-use development under construction in Yonkers, Forest City Ratner Cos.' Ridge Hill, has a 13.5-percent affordable housing requirement, he said.

SFC now proposes to build affordable housing equivalent to 5 percent of the project's total housing units "in and around the project area," Apicella said. He said it was "too expensive" to put those units within the project's high-rise towers.

Apicella said SFC also will guarantee a set-aside of \$35,000 per dwelling for another 5 percent of total project units to be used as subsidies to mitigate rent increases in the downtown area.

"That's a significant pot of money for a rent subsidy program," he said. "I think it's an extremely generous offer and very innovative." It would enable residents to stay in existing downtown housing after redevelopment, he said. "That's not negotiable," he said.

SFC to date has invested \$21 million in the Yonkers project. Though Apicella and other SFC executives have said the approval process has taken too long, the partners are not about to pull up stakes there.

"We're professionals," said Apicella. "We don't play the game of, if you don't do this by such and such a date, we'll take our marbles and go home."

Still, Apicella said Councilman Murtagh in his criticism expressed "a very realistic anxiety" about the development project "being put on hold or going away."

"The council has to move. This is not an opportunity in a real estate depression that you mull over too long." If the project continues to be delayed in a weakening economy, it could lose prospective retailers, condominium buyers and luxury-apartment tenants and financing, Apicella said.

"There's going to come a time that if the economy gets sicker, we're not going to be able to pull up this project by its bootstraps," he said.

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