

Montclair residents speak against Lackawanna development

[Julia Martin](#), North Jersey Record Published 4:23 p.m. ET Jan. 31, 2019 | Updated 12:54 p.m. ET Feb. 1, 2019

The Montclair Planning Board hears from the attorney and architect regarding the Lackawanna Plaza application. Owen Proctor, Staff Writer @OwenProctor1

MONTCLAIR — After 13 meetings and 50 hours of testimony, the public had its say about the development proposal for Lackawanna Station on Monday.

About a dozen residents waited in line at a packed Planning Board meeting to voice their objections to developer Brian Stolar's plans for the historic train station site.

Their comments reflected concerns about the proposed demolition of the train sheds at the 1913 train station; the need for a supermarket in the south end of town, where the Pathmark building has sat empty since 2015; and pedestrian access and safety at the site.

Stolar and his company, Pinnacle Properties, are also behind the Valley & Bloom apartments at Valley Road and Bloomfield Avenues, the MC Hotel at that site, the Seymour Street development at the Wellmont Theatre and the Siena condominiums on South Park Street.

Planning Board members will likely vote on the project at the next meeting, Monday, February 11.

Saving train sheds



Kathleen Bennett, chairperson of the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission, speaks against the Lackawanna Plaza development during public comment at the Planning Board meeting. January 28, 2019. (Photo: Julia Maritn)

Jason DeSalvo, former vice chairman of the Planning Board, set the tone for the evening with a condemnation of what he called the planned "desecration" of the station, which is on the state, local and national registers of historic places.

"The demolition of the train sheds to build a massive grocery store worthy of Route 46 is happening because of a lack of vision," he said.

"We can have both," he said. "Build the grocery store in the existing station."

Longtime resident Judith Rich called recent changes to the downtown "horrifying." Valley & Bloom is "unsightly," she said, and the "looming" new hotel "looks like a prison." She cited Maplewood as an example of a town that has maintained the scale and historic charm of

its shopping district, compared with South Orange, with its downtown full of "looming high rises."

"Please, let's not make any more mistakes," she said. "Preserve the historic station and don't create another traffic and parking nightmare." She asked the board to consider a food store on the scale of the "very popular Cedar Grove Super Foodtown."

Lisa Renner said Stolar is practicing "Frankenstinian preservation."

"He never hired a historical preservationist and never intended to preserve it," she said, citing a [New York Times article](#) about the Lackawanna Plaza purchase where Stolar is quoted as saying he planned to "completely redo it so it looks new and modern."

"I have no faith in the constructions, the plans," said Adrienne O'Toole.

"Look at Verona, Little Falls, the new buildings going up are charming, they're beautiful, they aren't blocking the view. We are totally missing the aesthetics on this project."

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Walkability

The site is at the intersection of two county roads, and would contain a large parking lot fronting Bloomfield Avenue and another across Grove Street.

Priscilla Eshelman said the developers are "blind to the needs of this community" and told the board that the two pedestrians killed in Montclair last year "should rest very, very heavily on you." She said three of the four approaches to the development would be a "pedestrian hellscape," citing the lack of a traffic signal on Glenridge Avenue and heavy traffic on Grove Street. "Making a left out of the parking lot from Grove will require split-second decision-making and a floored gas pedal," she said.

She said she was "shocked" that the plans showed that drivers could enter the site from Bloomfield Avenue south, when, she said, it is illegal to make a left turn into or out of the site from Bloomfield.

James Cotter of the Cloverhill Neighborhood Association worried that the traffic impact of nearby developments were not being taken into account, such as the new apartments going up on Bay Avenue, the Seymour Street development, the Mountainside Hospital expansion and "multiple" sites on Willow Street.

Cotter asked the board not to widen Grover Street and create a four-lane "speedway, but to widen sidewalks and shoulders and create bike lanes to reduce traffic impact on the area.

Cindy Steiner, head of the statewide advocacy organization NJ Bike and Walk coalition, placed some of the burden for pedestrian safety onto town officials, saying the parking lot would be safe for walkers with the "traffic calming" historic stanchions, but that town streets need to be made safer for pedestrians and bikers. "This town continues to add new developments without upgrading our transportation network to align with the infrastructure needs of these projects," she said. Stolar, the developer, is chairman of the board of NJ Bike and Walk coalition, Steiner said.

Parking

The "sea" of parking that is planned, said Cotter, "would have been perfect for Route 46 in 1988," but is "wholly out of character with downtown Montclair."

Despite that, the developer still has a "massive parking deficit," he said. The plans are 400 parking spaces short of zoning requirements, for which Stolar is seeking a variance. The developers say that, because the development is so close to public transportation and shops, residents will need fewer cars. They plan to employ valets to park the cars of supermarket customers, further reducing the need for adjacent parking.

Sharon Kokie, former member of the zoning board, worried that a lack of parking would lead to double-parking, as has happened since the Crosby bar opened on Glenridge Avenue,

up the road from the Lackawanna development. "It's dangerous and unfair to not have adequate parking," she said.

Supermarket?

The fact that the developers still haven't named a supermarket tenant aroused concern.

Cotter said Stolar's "lack of transparency" about potential tenants left the community to guess how a tenant might fit in with their needs. He questioned the viability of a supermarket there, saying the developer's building is too large, and the parking lot too small, to be profitable. Even if one is named, he said, with Stolar's many current construction projects in Montclair, "it's my guess that it will be years before ground is broken on a supermarket."

Several residents said all they wanted was "shovels in the ground" for a new supermarket. Justin Waldman said, "The waiting must stop!" and pointed out that the current plan still preserves the majority of the historical supports.

William Scott, Chairman, longtime 4th Ward resident and chairman of the NAACP Housing Committee, referenced a survey submitted to the board signed by 250 residents supporting a supermarket and the site plans. He asked Stolar if he would prioritize building the supermarket first, and Stolar said that would be the goal.

But Cotter pointed out that preserving the historic value of the station was particularly important for the 4th Ward, whose history, he said, was long treated as unimportant and was now being "willfully minimized to suit [the developer's] ends."

Pinnacle's response

During the developer's summation, attorney Tom Trautner said the developers are negotiating with two "value-added" supermarket tenants, and they may be able to release a name at the next meeting, though there will not be a signed contract.

As for the train sheds, he said, "we are not taking a bulldozer to the site, we are preserving 74 train stanchions and repurposing eight.

"You have to balance historical and redevelopment, and feasibility with profitability," he said. "That's the nature of compromise, not everyone gets what they want."

He pointed out that Planning Board members don't have the option of voting on competing visions, only on the proposal before them.

"All you have to do is vote 'yes,' " he said.

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