

PACKED CROWD VOICES CONCERNS WITH LACKAWANNA REDEVELOPMENT PLANS

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Lackawanna Redevelopment hearing continued on Monday. About 40 residents gave public comment.

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After 13 months of back-and-forth testimony on the Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment plan, residents had their say in front of the planning board Monday night, with some raising trust issues with the developer.



A rendering of what the developer has proposed for a supermarket on the site.

COURTESY PINNACLE

The hearing continued on Jan. 28 for the historic Lackawanna railroad station property redevelopment, which promises to bring in a much-needed

supermarket, but could come at the cost of some historical structures on the property.

The redevelopment plan calls for a multi-use development including 154 units of housing, a supermarket, medical office and some retail. Developers Pinnacle and Hampshire plan to refurbish the former Pathmark, but contend the train platforms, part of a glass-enclosed mall since the 1980s, need to be razed to make way for more parking and doubting the historical value of the platforms. Historic preservationists, however, seek to incorporate the train platforms-turned-mall into the plans as the supermarket itself.

Specifically, the developers have proposed a 47,786-square-foot supermarket flanked by a set of covered train platforms, incorporating them into a glass-facade entrance. Seventy four of the 98 train platform columns or stanchions would be kept in place. Eight would be relocated for use in a covered bus stop and at the entrance of the Grove Street tunnel.

The next hearing is scheduled for Feb. 11, when a final decision could be made.

“But there are no guarantees,” said chairman John Wynn.

NOW RATHER THAN LATER

Some residents were eager for a supermarket in their neighborhood soon, referring to the area as a “food desert” since Pathmark closed in 2015, and explaining that they have been forced to shop miles away or at expensive bodegas or drug stores.

But most residents who spoke were in favor of complete preservation of the train station, which is on the state and national historic registry and in a historic district.

Former planning board vice president Jason DeSalvo reminded the board that the entirety of Lackawanna remains intact and that it was up to the board to ensure that the structures are completely preserved.

“We can have both,” he said, referring to both a supermarket and the historic preservation.

But William Scott, a member of the housing commission and the Montclair chapter of the NAACP, reminded the board of the town council’s May resolution stating that a supermarket is needed “now, rather than later” and for the board to back the current plan with “dispatch.”

NAACP members Beverly Bussey and Rosita Dobson reminded the board that the NAACP was to advocate for “equal access to proper nutrition.”

Scott then asked Brian Stolar of Pinnacle directly if he could have his word that the supermarket be built first. Stolar nodded. But when board member Carmel Loughman asked if Stolar was saying, on the record, that the supermarket would be the first to be constructed, Stolar said, "That is not what I am saying. We will prioritize it, get it built as fast and quickly as we can. I can't tell you without any construction drawings that nothing could be done first."

Frank Godlewski called the debate over a supermarket versus historical preservation a "manufactured crisis."

But residents questioned the developer's failure to name supermarket tenants that have shown interest in the space.

"No tenants have testified," said Caroline Kane Levy, an HPC member. "It was saved from the wrecking ball once and should be again. They have not proved it is not historical. Maybe Pinnacle and Hampshire are not the right developers."

'FRANKENSTEIN PRESERVATION'

Janie Cutter also asked the board to not make a decision until a tenant is named and questioned why the board would not listen to town historians, but instead a witness paid for by the developer.

“We are building a site perfect for Route 46 in the 1988,” Cutter said about the plans.

She reminded the crowd that the project would take years to complete, pointing to construction of the MC Hotel and on Seymour Street.

“The decision should not be rushed,” she warned.

Calling the plans “Frankenstein preservation,” Liseann Renner reminded the board that the developers bought a historic site. “They never hired a historic preservation architect, instead they filed for a demolition permit.”

Ira Smith, who was an HPC member when the town extended the historic district to include Lackawanna Plaza, said the largest part of the the historical elements would be gone by demolishing the platforms. They “reflect a time when people traveled by train,” he said.

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"It never occurred to me [they] would be gone," he said. "Will people notice if the roofs are taken off? Yes. It will just be a bunch of columns in a very large parking lot."

Adam Frazee told the board it seemed odd to him to have to stand before the board to ask that a national landmark not be demolished.

Other residents questioned the construction standards by the developer. Judith Rich and Adriana O'Toole pointed to other developments by Stolar of Pinnacle, such as Valley and Bloom and the MC Hotel.

"Changes to the downtown have been horrifying," said Rich.

O'Toole said she had "no faith" in the developer, adding the developments are "missing the aesthetics" in Montclair's downtown construction.

CALLING FOR COOPERATION

Priscilla Eshelman accused the developers of not acting in "good faith" and asking why the developer would not work with the HPC.

"They don't understand shoppers or the community at all," she said, going on to question if the "47,000 square foot shell" would become a supermarket at all.

HPC chair Kathleen Bennett concurred that Pinnacle and Hampshire did not work with the commission. The HPC's mission, and as stated in the master plan, is to ensure that historic buildings are taken into account with redevelopment, she said. She debunked the developer's argument that the Lackawanna historic nomination did not include the train sheds, showing a map included in the nomination. The state and national websites would be updated to include GPS coordinates of the site, Bennett added.

"I ask that the developer be held to higher standards than he has thus far demonstrated," Bennett said.

Bonnie Fogel argued that the developer is not obligated to bring in a supermarket and that any big box store could become a tenant. "I do not believe that [a supermarket] is his intention," she said.

Tom Trautner, the attorney for the developer, said that negotiations were well underway with one tenant who they may be ready to reveal at the Feb. 11 meeting.

He also reminded the board that its role is not to vote on "competing visions for the site."

Justin Waldman pointed to the tax dollars lost to the town as shoppers head to neighboring communities to do grocery shopping.

Addressing residents' concern for pedestrian access to the proposed development, Cyndi Steiner, executive director of the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition, said the plan reflected good access and that some plan elements could not be overlooked such as loading docks and truck access. The placement of the columns throughout the parking lot would serve as traffic calming measures, she said.

Steiner disclosed that Stolar serves as NJBWC board chair, but that he was not aware of her statements beforehand.

She blamed the town overall for not implementing safer roadways throughout town. In 2009, Montclair was the first town to pass a Complete Streets Policy resolution, but little has been done since then to create better pedestrian and bike access, she said. The town continues to allow new developments, but without upgrading a network to align with the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists, she said.

The developers are seeking two parking variances for the site — an allowance of front-yard parking for 83 vehicles next to the Pig & Prince, and

an allowance of 459 parking spots for the entire site, down from the required 833.

[To watch all the residents' comment watch video](#)

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