

## **Merchants, seniors proponents of Master Plan for Montclair Center**

By Andrew Segedin

Montclair Center Business Improvement District Executive Director Luther Flurry has tracked the drafting of Montclair's Master Plan through the past four years and listened to much of the vocal opposition it has received from members of the community.

Flurry just so happens to not understand the opposition as it pertains to Montclair's midtown.

Harking back to the initial community meetings pertaining to the Master Plan in December 2010, Flurry said that key concerns raised by the community were the protection of suburban neighborhoods, constraining property taxes, and maintaining the school system all while, ideally, being environmentally friendly.

As Flurry sees it, enabling development in Montclair Center does all that, by keeping construction outside residential portions of Montclair, developing housing units that will add to the tax base while adding minimal children to the school system, and decreasing energy consumption by encouraging mass transit.

"I understand the fears of the unknown, especially when they affect my home," Flurry said. "But so much of the Master Plan is geared toward protecting those homes that I don't understand the degree of reaction people have to the draft Master Plan."

If anything, according to Flurry, the existing Master Plan creates a barrier to modest development. A large portion of that barrier consists of unresolved parking issues, Flurry said.

Current zoning requires off-street parking that assumes buildings are at peak capacity at all times, Flurry said. The BID executive director said that he would be in favor of the township looking into "payment in lieu of parking" in which developers would be able to pay into a fund geared toward the creation of structured parking rather than come up with the spots themselves.

Incentive zoning, a policy in which the township would give special considerations such as expedited approval processes to developers willing to add affordable housing units, green spaces and the like could also be considered according to Flurry



*The Siena is an example of mixed-use development in Montclair Center.*

In the meantime, Flurry said that his goal is focused on making Montclair Center as vibrant as possible. Presently, the district has little daytime demand, something he hopes will be partially fixed by the inclusion of offices in the Valley & Bloom development and the proposed hotel, The MC.

"The Master Plan is not a master build, if there's [a need for] density and it's met I don't want anymore," Flurry said. "I'm not demanding density. What I'm saying is that if there is a demand for it, I want it to happen downtown and I hope there is demand for it because our retailers need it."

"How many blocks of downtown do you enjoy walking down? If it's less than 100 percent, I have a lot of work to do. We have many great retail successes. We don't have the demand, sufficient demand, for success to be the rule, for me to say that the majority of our retailers are doing well."

Michael Lami, owner of Printer's Place on South Fullerton Avenue, is a zoning official in his hometown of Madison and is familiar with the push and pull between merchants and residents over development. For Montclair Center, Lami opined that the pluses of development outweigh the negatives, believing that the district's footprint is large enough to support increased density while creating a cozy, downtown feel.

Fellow merchant Arlene Carrini, of One Savvy Design on Church Street, also sees a mix of opinions between residents and merchants. Carrini described Montclair as a cross between a suburb and a city, a "destination town" that has attracted former Brooklyn and Manhattan residents and merchants from across the Hudson River - which was why it appealed to her as the location for her business.

"I chose Montclair because it's a working town, because it's an evolving city," Carrini said. "I wanted a destination town and I think when people choose Montclair, these are the factors that lure them in ... People love Church Street. Everybody knows Bloomfield Avenue. Restaurants. Realtors. It isn't a dead town, so it shouldn't die. It should evolve."

### **If you build it they will come**

Don Zief of the Montclair Transportation Advisory Committee has been involved in the draft process of the Master Plan, he and his colleagues reviewing drafts and providing their input.

What Zief potentially sees in the Master Plan is a means to facilitate the committee's goal of creating a shuttle service from housing units to local NJ Transit train stations, particularly Bay Street Station.

According to Zief, Montclair faces the issue where many people who commute using mass transit first drive to train stations, creating waiting lists for parking at Bay Street Station, Walnut Street Station and others.

What the committee has discussed, Zief noted, has been a shuttle service similar to that of Glen Ridge and Maplewood that would make driving to train stations less necessary.

"You have to pick and choose," said Zief of the committee's focus on Bay Street Station. "I don't think we can afford several shuttle buses right now. If that's successful, we'd like to expand to other places in town."

Cyndi Steiner, a Montclair resident and executive director of the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition, told The Times that she, too, has followed the drafting of the Master Plan. The need for mixed-use residential developments in business districts is as strong as ever, Steiner said, as more and more members of the millennial generation look for housing.

Fewer and fewer young adults are getting driver licenses, according to Steiner, who said they prefer to bike and walk to retail and entertainment - necessitating housing in and around municipal downtowns.

While parts of Montclair, particularly the northern portion of the township, contain big, sleepy roads lined with old homes, and are not conducive to this kind of housing, areas in and around Church and South Park streets are, Steiner said.

In Manhattan, people seldom think twice about walking five or 10 blocks with a bag of groceries, the bike and walk advocate said. In suburbia, she said, people shy away from walking even a block - but the trend is changing.

"If you build it, they will come," Steiner said of bicycle and pedestrian-friendly areas. "You can't look at it like 'nobody's doing it, we shouldn't build the infrastructure.' If we build it, people will use it."

What millennials are said to be gravitating toward - walkability to retail sites, proximity to culture and easy access to public transit - are also priorities for local seniors looking to downsize, according to Ann Lippel of Montclair's Senior Citizens Advisory Committee.

Lippel told The Times that she sees the Master Plan as being consistent with what residents over the age of 55 have communicated to her through a mass survey - providing an opportunity to downsize and to do so affordably.

More specifically, in a recent survey of seniors, Lippel found that the local population has expressed a desire for housing where they would be able to live on one floor with optimal mobility to shopping, particularly to supermarkets, and have the stability of long-term leases.

At a recent meeting focused on Montclair Center Gateway Phase 2, Lippel identified potential parcels on Portland Place that could be adapted into a senior village. United Methodist Housing, the builder of Park Ridge Apartments on Glenridge Avenue, has been looking for land to develop such housing, Lippel said.

### **Word from the Siena**

The Siena at Montclair on South Park Street has been an oft-discussed example of mixed-use development in Montclair Center. Speaking with The Times, residents of the Siena said that they see the appeal of having similar developments in their neighborhood.

"I think, for me, anything that goes on in this town, to me, is advantageous," Joe Barbella said. "Our terrace is across from the [proposed] assisted-living facility. I feel like it's a benefit. There's going to be an introduction to new people here."

Barbella, and his husband Robert Breagy, were among the first couples to move into the Siena. Barbella, who formerly served on the municipal Beautification Committee, understood that there has been opposition to the plan from fellow Montclairites, many of them older, longtime residents. Younger residents, he said, seem less opposed. As Barbella sees it, the township could benefit from the tax revenue and jobs created by development.

Breagy echoed many of his husband's points, adding that additional residents and anchor stores could help Montclair Center businesses from failing.

Nancy LeRoy said that she and her fellow residents moved to The Siena to be near restaurants, shopping, the library and other attractions. A former vocal opponent of the now-shut Park Sports Bar at the intersection of South Park and Church streets, LeRoy stressed that she wouldn't be in favor for just anything to be added to Montclair Center, but felt that restaurants, shops, bars and galleries would add to Montclair's midtown.

"It makes a great deal of sense to me to have appropriate development if the community is involved," LeRoy said. "Montclair is a destination place for New Jerseyans."

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<http://www.northjersey.com/news/business/praising-not-panning-the-master-plan-1.1039309?page=all>