



BRISTOL

'New Urbanism' Drives Firm's Plan For Old Mall Site In Bristol

By DON STACOM

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BRISTOL —

After a series of frustrating false starts, city officials will bring out their newest strategy Monday for reviving downtown.

The Bristol Downtown Development Corp. is inviting residents to hear a Long Island-based development company outline its plan for the barren Bristol Centre Mall site. The session starts at 6:30 p.m. at Bristol Eastern High School.

Renaissance Downtowns LLC wants to be named chief developer of the 17-acre property. The company says it can attract builders and investors to transform the vacant lot with new multistory buildings. Renaissance says that when the economy rebounds, the site can be a hub of new development with apartments or condos, street-level stores, restaurants, a hotel and, possibly, professional offices.

"Empty nesters and young professionals will define the heart of the market, as these demographics gravitate toward higher density urban living," predicts the company's 55-page proposal. "Unique dining concepts and local specialty shops will animate the street scene and differentiate this district from other local options."

Donald Monti, chairman of Renaissance, will get to tell the public about his plan for making the site the centerpiece of a revived downtown.

The vacant lot, optimistically named Depot Square by city officials, was home

for more than 40 years to one of Connecticut's least successful shopping centers. When the Bristol Centre Mall was built in the heart of downtown in the mid-'60s, developers said it could help restore an urban center that already was in steep decline. But the sprawling concrete mall and acres of asphalt parking lot were better designed for the car-centered culture of the suburbs, according to some longtime residents.

It never caught on as a destination shopping center for other towns, and it went through a series of owners who struggled to keep it profitable. The quality of tenants slid, too, with name-brand department stores and clothing retailers replaced by bargain shops and knickknack outlets.

In 2003, city officials began planning to buy the mall, demolish it and put up a complex of public buildings, a performing arts theater and new retail and office space. Gov. John G. Rowland offered \$45 million in state aid.

But that plan, too, seemed doomed. Rowland resigned nearly a year before the city closed the sale, and the new governor, M. Jodi Rell, never shared his enthusiasm for the project. The plan's two chief proponents — Mayor Gerard Couture and state Rep. Kosta Diamantis — both lost their seats after the \$5.3 million sale went through.

Couture's successor, William Stortz, scrapped the idea for public buildings and proposed an all-private development instead. But critics said he simply dawdled; the boarded-up mall was still waiting for a wrecker's ball when Stortz was voted out in 2007.

New Mayor Art Ward followed Stortz's plan to turn the project over to an appointed board, the Bristol Downtown Development Corp. But by the time the mall was razed, environmental studies were finished and marketing materials were assembled, the retail and commercial real estate markets had collapsed.

Now, Renaissance says it can put together a development plan based on "new urbanism," with a heavy emphasis on having people live near where they work and shop. The company's Depot Square plan includes parking garages, a civic plaza and space for a train station if passenger service is restored on the freight line that runs along the edge of the property.

The company contends that if the full project is built, it would generate \$1.5 million a year in tax revenue for the city.

If the downtown development group is satisfied with Renaissance's proposal, it plans to pursue a preliminary agreement with the company later this month.

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