



A new outlook for downtown Developer, city discussing revitalization proposal

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WATERBURY- The city is negotiating a deal with a New York developer to transform the long-neglected downtown into a high-end mix of boutique shops, restaurants and apartments.

Renaissance Downtowns, a private real estate investment and development firm out of Long Island, wants to redevelop the central business district into a place where boomers, millennials and the creative class can live, work and play.

That means a downtown that is growing up, literally, with two, three and even four layers of studio and loft apartments filled with people who would support street-level retail businesses, said president Donald Monti .

"The only way to revitalize a down town is to have people live in it," he said. "Drive through a Lot of downtowns at six at night, including Waterbury's, and you'd think there was a curfew. You need people living downtown to really bring it to life.

"Renaissance is pitching a "new urbanism" revitalization plan to a dozen Connecticut cities, including Bristol, Norwich and Meriden, but it has yet to finish one, a fact Monti attributes to the newness of the idea and the weakness of the economy.

Exactly how this will all work is being hammered out by lawyers for the Waterbury Development Corp., the development arm of the city, and Renaissance, which is not related to the developers of Renaissance Place in Naugatuck.

Renaissance wants to become the city's "preferred developer" in the downtown. In some contracts, that means tax credits or first rights to develop city projects, while in others it's no more than a courtesy card to show off to would-be investors.

Although the contract details remain under negotiation, Monti and Mayor Michael J. Jarjura are clear on one fact: Neither the relationship, whatever that may be, nor the development itself will cost the city a dime.

"It's all up-front investment on our part," Monti said. "We want the city as a partner in creating a vision for downtown, so the city will have control, but the risk will be ours. If we can reach a shared vision, then we'll go out and make it happen."

The company is focusing its early attention on two areas consisting of more than a dozen languishing, largely vacant lots littered with tired for-sale and for-lease signs. Altogether, it's about three acres of real estate valued at more than \$6 million.

Renaissance wants to turn a string of parking lots along Printers Court into fancy row houses and transform the triangular block that includes the old Lombard Building into a civic plaza surrounded by street-level retail and upper-level apartments.

The areas include buildings housing such familiar retailers as Walgreen's, B&Bs, Fletcher's Cafe, Yu Beauty Supplies and Pizza Express. The properties are owned by groups like Blarney Stone Realty, DiJoseph Associates 11C, Jonsar LLC and Northern Expansion LLC.

It's unclear whether the areas, which Renaissance calls demonstration sites, are targeted for purchase and redevelopment by the company itself, or simply examples of what could be if current landowners sign lip for the plan.

Monti said Renaissance will only do direct redevelopment of city-owned parcels, but there are none in the demonstration areas. Mayoral aide Steve Gambini says Monti will buy at least some of the land but is keeping mum to avoid driving up sale prices.

Renaissance has started meeting with key property owners like Tom Gessler, a New York-based investor who owns a .3-acre lot in the Lombard block. Monti hopes to create a private property owners' alliance full of Gesslers to realize his vision.

The plan of development is still in its infancy, Monti said. If the city agrees to give Renaissance preferred developer status, his team of planners, architects and others would craft a detailed proposal complete with financial projections.

Monti said the public would have many opportunities to help shape the proposal.

With enough political will, he estimated it would take nine to 12 months to make any plan "shovel ready," but actual construction would probably have to wait until the economy rebounds.

Monti said he wanted to reach a preferred developer deal with the city before he rolled out the plan publicly, but Jarjura couldn't resist revealing it when pressed to lay out his downtown plan during a pre-election interview.

"Don't tell me I don't have a plan for downtown," Jarjura said as he plopped a one-inch thick proposal from Renaissance down on his table. Pointing at that plan, which WDC received last month, he said: "Look at this. Just look at what we could do."

Monti approached Jarjura through Rep. Jonathan A. Harris of West Hartford, the former mayor whom Jarjura knew from his years in the state legislature. Jarjura said he was intrigued enough to talk it over with WDC Leo Frank.

Together they decided to quietly issue a request for qualifications and urged the Glen View, N.Y., firm to respond. Renaissance was one of two firms to submit a plan. The other firm was disqualified. Negotiations with Monti began a month ago.

Jarjura's political rivals in the Independent Patty say they welcome word of a potential development downtown, but they question the timing of the news just 10 days before the mayoral election and the lack of details.

"Sounds like an October surprise to me - all bark and no teeth," said John E. Theriault, the Independent mayoral candidate. "We need to fill the vacancies that we already have before we worry about building up."

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