

North Brunswick moves forward with revamped Route 1 transit village plan

By JARED KALTWASSER • STAFF WRITER • June 14, 2010

NORTH BRUNSWICK — The would-be transit village on the former Johnson & Johnson site now has a new name and preliminary approvals from the Planning Board.

Jonathan Frieder, managing partner for developer North Brunswick TOD Associates, said the development on the 212-acre site at Route 1 and Aaron Road will be called "MainStreetNB." With last week's Planning Board approval of a general development plan and preliminary site plan for the project, Frieder said it will likely be take about a year for applications and approvals needed before a groundbreaking could take place.

The preliminary site plan includes one significant change — the fourth box store that had been in the concept plan has now been replaced with a plaza.

"It's buildings that have retail in the first floor and apartments above in a square surrounding a central plaza," Frieder said. "And it has a restaurant on the green."

Frieder said the change was due to a number of factors pertaining to marketing and design, but he said it was also due to the concerns about big box stores raised by residents during public hearings earlier this month. The remaining three large retail establishments are still in the plan.

The Planning Board's approvals were both unanimous. The general development plan locks in the zoning approvals for the next 20 years, said Michael C. Hritz, director of community development for the township.

"It protects the developer who now is going to make significant investments at the site from having the zoning changed on them," Hritz said.

Those investments include about \$8 million in roadway improvements along Route 1, which the developer agreed to pay for before the first phase of the development opens. The first phase includes the large retail stores, the first block of a mixed-use "Main Street," and about 300 housing units.

A second phase, which could not be built unless and until the state agrees to put a train station on the site, would fill out the Main Street and boost the housing to a total of 1,875 units.

The preliminary site plan is the formal adoption of the footprint for the development, though TOD Associates would need to return to the Planning Board for final approvals before it could start construction of any building.

Tom Vigna, the township planner, said a preliminary site plan is typically good for three years, with the possibility of two one-year extensions. Given the scale of this project, however, Vigna said the board chose to give the developer 10 years' approval for the first phase (plus the possibility of the two extensions), and 20 years for the full build-out.

Councilman and Planning Board Member Ralph Andrews said the developer also agreed to relinquish a farm assessment on about 60 acres of the property. When Johnson & Johnson owned the property, Andrews said, it had planted crops such as alfalfa on part of the land in order to get a lower farmland tax rate. Andrews said the Planning Board wanted that assessment to end.

"We said obviously it's not a farm anymore, we're moving forward with a major development and we feel this is no longer applicable," Andrews said.