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What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

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Transit Expands in North Brunswick

by Jed Weisberger

Jonathan Frieder, managing partner of Garden Homes Development — developer of the North Brunswick Transit Village on the former Johnson & Johnson tract on Route 1 — has a smile on his face and a feeling of satisfaction these days.



Jonathan Frieder

His firm's project, bordered by Aaron Road and Commerce Drive on Route 1 North, received a huge shot in the arm on January 8 when New Jersey Transit announced plans to construct a \$30 million state-of-the-art train station on its Northeast Corridor line at the rear boundary of the 212-acre property.

Bids on preliminary engineering for the new rail stop, which Frieder says is the key piece to the entire North Brunswick project, went out in January and are due back to N.J. Transit on Friday, February 15.

According to Frieder, the project boasts a "perfect storm" of factors — a massive single-owner rectangular property with a new train station located adjacent to the Northeast Corridor rail line and Route 1. He also points out the tract is "virtually absent wetlands and there is no displacement of business or homes."

"This has opportunity to be transformative because it is such a significant property," he says. "It's the (undeveloped) hole in the donut in an area that had significant growth over past 30 to 35 years. When Johnson & Johnson first built there, there was nothing around. Now we are transforming the property into a huge new town center that will be five times the size of downtown Princeton."

"The train station is definitely a game-changer," adds Frieder, a Princeton resident for two decades. "There are three key parts to the story here. There is the transit side, with New Jersey Transit, the land-use side, which is us, and the township we are building in and working with."

Frieder says that since the property fronts the Northeast Corridor line for over 5,000 feet, the train station was the major component needed to move forward with the plan.

The addition of the North Brunswick station, as part of a project that will eventually include 870,000 square feet of retail stores, 1,875 residential units, 375 hotel rooms, and 195,000 square feet of office space, will close a 14-mile gap — the longest on NJ Transit's Northeast Corridor between Princeton Junction and Jersey Avenue.

Phase I of the transit village, with construction beginning this year, will include 300 residential units and 500,000 square feet of commercial space, with Costco and Target as the anchors. A sign heralding the arrival of Costco in 2014 is present on Route 1 North.

"We have been waiting since 2006, when our company bought the property," says Frieder. "Johnson & Johnson manufactured several products here before ceasing production in 2004. There was a lot of talk about the future of the property. Johnson & Johnson wanted to see it put to positive use. It was a legacy property to them."

"Our firm was chosen to redevelop the property and we're quite pleased to have the opportunity. We've gone through the process with all the permits and are pleased we have excellent partners in government and transportation to work with."

Garden Homes Development is part of the Wilf family of companies, which include the National Football League's Minnesota Vikings and shopping centers and residential developments throughout the United States. The North Brunswick Transit Village will be

known as MainStreetNB, with attractive brick designators at several spots.

Frieder is originally from the Philadelphia area, growing up in Abington, PA. He says he began his career in real estate in Center City, Philadelphia, working for the Helmsley Organization.

"I got my training in that company and then went off on my own in real estate," Frieder says. "One thing led to another and I eventually joined with my brother-in-law in the development and building business in New Jersey about 20 years ago."

That company, Garden Homes, has developed numerous commercial and residential projects in Mercer, Middlesex, and Somerset counties — including the Square at West Windsor shopping center at Route 1 and Meadow Road where Lowe's and Trader Joe's are among the tenants, and the Windsor Woods apartment complex located on Meadow Road adjacent to the shopping center. The company also developed the Princeton Highlands and Green Hill Manor apartments on Route 27.

Frieder says the success in planning the project is attributable to a combination of Garden Homes' partnership with North Brunswick and an inclusive process that involved town residents from the outset. "North Brunswick was a realistic partner in that they understood that the project would not function without a critical mass of residential housing units," says Frieder.

"We also recognized the need to bring the community along at reasonable pace. We had to be very patient," he says, adding that the developers had to wait for the public to get on board before they started the process of applying for government approvals. "We never ventured into that world until we knew the community was in line with the vision of what we were proposing."

In addition to housing, the key retail element is the inclusion of big box retail stores Costco and Target in the plan.

"They are the present and future of U.S. retailing and we can't ignore that," Frieder says. "Some opposed Costco and Target because they worried they would take business away from smaller retailers. Others objected to how most big box stores look."

"We plan to have dozens of retail specialty shops of all kinds within the town, and we feel having Costco and Target here will help both bring in customers and drive them to the smaller shops, which will carry merchandise the two big stores won't have. They can be the economic engine that drives main street and brings traffic to the mom and pop businesses there."

Frieder says that Garden Homes is moving ahead with the project despite the lagging economy. "Real Estate development has a long lead time to bring a project from idea to reality. Developers know they can't time the market. We've been through all the different economic cycles of the years. We know that this is an A-plus location."

"We are planning to build a town, a place where a resident can walk to the train, walk to shop, have places to gather and meet," Frieder says. "America always built towns. We just seemed to stop after World War II."

"There's a pent up demand for access to public transportation (that will be offered by the new train station)," he says. "There's a demand and a movement to build these dense mixed-use developments. This is the antidote to sprawl. That's why we think it's viable now and in the future. It's a proven formula and a proven model that works."

New Jersey Transit spokesperson Nancy Snyder says the project "will be a big boost to both our customers and operational efficiency on our Northeast Corridor line. Putting out the bids is just the start of it all with the train station."

This will come in conjunction with upgrade of Amtrak's wiring and signals in the area and expansion of N.J. Transit's rail yards adjacent to the Jersey Avenue station, where many North Brunswick commuters catch trains to Newark and New York on a daily basis.

The North Brunswick station will not only have all the latest travel amenities, but a "flyover" just south of the passenger stop that will allow southbound trains stopping there to easily turn around and head back toward Newark and New York.

"The flyover will be just like a turnaround ramp on a highway," Snyder explained. "What this will do is allow us to run trains to North Brunswick from Penn Station and turn them around for a quick return trip."

"Right now, trains have to go all the way to Trenton to turn around. This will increase our operational efficiency immensely in that area."

Snyder emphasized the addition of the North Brunswick stop will not affect or lengthen the journey for Central Jersey commuters utilizing trains from Trenton, Hamilton or Princeton Junction.

"Just the opposite," says Snyder. "With how the North Brunswick station is planned, I think all

commuters along the line will find some advantages.”

The North Brunswick station will alleviate commuter congestion at Jersey Avenue. “We’ve seen a major increase in ridership at the Jersey Avenue station,” says Snyder. “The North Brunswick stop will be quite beneficial to that area.”

It will also benefit the eventual residents of MainStreetNB. Frieder is hoping the first residences will be available for occupancy some time in 2014.

“We will have apartments, condos and townhouses,” he says. “Some will be for sale, some for rental. Phase I will consist of the first 300 housing units, the Costco and Target stores, and the first block of Main Street, which will eventually traverse the entire area.

“Some of the residences will be above retail shops, or behind them. Some buildings will have elevators, some won’t. The idea is to offer future residents the lifestyle they are looking for.”

As far as architecture, Frieder explains MainStreetNB has the esthetics covered there as well. “Both Costco and Target will not look like their usual outlets,” he says. “They are being required to use certain colors of bricks in certain combinations. Their buildings will have an upscale look that will be pleasing to the eye.”

The architecture itself will take an early to mid-20th century look. Frieder and his associates looked at similar town center projects all over the United States and in Europe for ideas that would work in North Brunswick.

Out of this came plans for squares, plazas, recreation areas —all the trappings of a small town that, for the most part, is self-contained. “Look what they did in Ohio,” Frieder says, holding up a picture.

“We really liked this.” Quickly he showed a community in Italy, with a square and possibly fountains his architect, J. Robert Hillier of Princeton, is re-creating.

“There’s a certain look we want for our buildings, emulating a town,” he says. “We worked with Bob Hillier and several experts in planning, studying how similar projects to ours were successful. What we are doing will have an effect on the future of North Brunswick Township.”

MainStreetNB is also being built with the environment and sustainability in mind. “We will have solar energy throughout the property, and we will use no direct water for irrigation,” says Frieder. “We will collect rain water from our ponds, which will front on Route 1, and use that for irrigation.”

While the goal is to complete Phase I, which will be built in the southern end of the property, by 2014, Phase II, which includes a hotel, more retail space, restaurants, an enhanced variety of residences and completion of a street network, may not see its completion on the north side, for a number of years.

“It could be 10 or 20 years or it could be sooner,” says Frieder. “Several factors will affect the time-frame on Phase II.”

Several buildings have been demolished on the property, but some, with a few firms renting space, will remain intact until Phase II construction.

Garden Homes Development, 2300 Route 1 Suite 4; North Brunswick, NJ 08902; 732-398-9700. Jonathan Frieder, managing partner. www.gardenhomes.com

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