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CONCORD

**Housing shortage shadows zoning**

Mixed use neighborhoods where people can walk to services are central to two new proposals

By DAVID BROOKS

The starting gun has fired for two very large mixed-use projects in Concord following initial hearings before the Planning Board this week, but the biggest presence in the room wasn’t really the projects themselves – it was the state’s housing crisis.

“We’ve been in front of a lot of planning boards and we can tell how the (housing) issue in New Hampshire has just gotten worse and worse,” said Kevin Lacasse of New England Family Housing, which wants to put more than 900 units along the Merrimack River near Sewall’s Falls, after listening to 10 public comments that largely backed the proposal. “The only people we used to hear from are the people who oppose a project. … You can tell we’ve hit a whole other level with the amount of support coming out for a project.”

That proposal between Mountain Road and the Merrimack River, called Monitor Way because most of the land is owned by the parent company of the Concord Monitor, envisions 151 workforce housing units, 327 market-rate apartments within a mixed-use retail center, 223 standalone market-rate apartments, 71 townhouses for sale and 172 condominiums for sale and rent plus more than 100,000 square feet of commercial space and a large self storage building.

This sort of large, mixed-use development where residents can walk to many services is encouraged under the city’s proposed zoning changes, being called Concord Next.

“We are working with staff, following along the Concord Next initiatives. We did think that it set a good foundation of what this property can look like,” said Lacasse.

A few of the 10 people who spoke Wednesday were concerned about the amount of traffic it would create in the relatively rural part of north Concord east of the river. Developers plan to build it in stages, starting with 40 townhouses at the north end that would exit on an extension of Whitney Road leading to Hoit Road. Later phases, including apartments, workforce housing and retail, could exit to Mountain Road or south to Sewall’s Falls Road.

The company hopes to begin construction next year. Even so, Lacasse said, the entire development would not be finished until 2028 at the earliest.

The other proposal aired Wednesday, which doesn’t have a name yet, would replace Steeplegate Mall and Regal Cinema on Loudon Road with more than 600 housing units and a variety of businesses in another mixed-use development designed to be walkable.

“If you’re on the planning board and you’re not excited about the redevelopment of the Steeplegate Mall, you need a new committee to be on,” said Ari Pollock, an attorney representing the Onyx Group, which has purchased the properties. He quickly added that it was a joke.

Initial plans from the Onyx Group show that two of those businesses coming to the site could be Costco and Whole Foods, but Pollock said that while both companies are interested in the site, there are no guarantees they will sign up until all details are approved by the city.

The initial plan calls for 625 apartments in five buildings, half of them one-bedroom and half two-bedrooms.

Traffic was less of a concern at Wednesday’s hearing because of its location between Loudon and Sheep Davis roads, both of which are heavily traveled. The biggest issue mentioned by board members was a shortage of green space in the initial design of the 59-acre property.

“There seems way too much parking, way too much impervious surface, nowhere near enough green space,” said Board member Carol Foss.

Part of the issue, developers said, is that JC Penney, Altitude Trampoline Park and Zoo Health Club have long-term leases and have to remain, requiring apartments to be built around them.

“We’re doing our best to work around those constraints … On some of those issues, we’re probably going to come back and say there wasn’t a lot we could do,” Pollack said.

Pollack said if all goes well, work would start next year and finish up by 2026.

Both projects still have a host of questions to answer, ranging from emergency access at Monitor Way to sewer hookups at the Steeplegate Mall site. Planning Board Chairman Richard Woodfin assured the audience that they would be subject of several more public hearings.

A map of a housing development

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Conceptual drawing of Monitor Way mixed-used development including apartments, town homes, condos, storage and trails.

A map of a shopping center

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Axonometric view of proposed development of Steeplegate Mall/Regal Cinema site

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