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Commission recommends denial of revision to Fairmont Greens plan

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star
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The Winchester Planning Commission is recommending denial of a proposed revision to an August 2022 rezoning that set the stage for a major residential and commercial development project in the city's North End.

"The intent [of the proposed revision] is to separate the east and the west sides into two ownership phases that would not be contingent upon each other to move forward," Winchester Planning Director David Stewart told the commission at its meeting on Tuesday afternoon. "However, the plans themselves as originally approved back four years ago would still be in place for this rezoning."

The rezonings approved in 2022 made way for a mixed-use development called 550 Fairmont Avenue, which was proposed by Healthcare Development Partners (HDP) of Chicago. The project is now referred to as Fairmont Greens.

As proposed, Fairmont Greens would maintain the original plans for 550 Fairmont Avenue and would include four four-story buildings containing 170 one- and two-bedroom apartments, 16 three-story structures with 92 two- and three-bedroom townhouses and approximately 14,800 square feet of commercial space for retail stores, restaurants and amenities for the development's residents. It would be built on 10.9 acres comprised of 17 individual parcels located primarily in the 200 block of Wick Street and along the 500 block of Fairmont Avenue.

In August 2022, City Council agreed to change the zoning designation for the 17 parcels from Limited Industrial (M-1) to High Density Residential (HR) with a planned unit development (PUD) overlay.

HDP President Todd Bryant said at the time that his company would buy and develop the 10.9 acres of land, all of which was owned by National Fruit Product Co., once the rezonings were approved. On Tuesday, David Frank of the Pennoni engineering firm in Winchester said HDP and National Fruit could never come to terms and the deal was scuttled.

With the 2022 rezonings still in place, National Fruit continued to seek a buyer for the 10.9 acres. As it now stands, the fruit processing company still owns the parcels to the west of Fairmont Avenue but a limited-liability company, V Fairmont Wick LLC, owns the ones to the east that comprise about 80% of the development's total acreage.

According to the Virginia State Corporation Commission, V Fairmont Wick is based at 526 N. Desplaines St. in Chicago, which is also the address of a firm called Aberdeen Construction.

Frank said V Fairmont Wick and National Fruit both want the land divided into eastern and western portions so that they can be developed individually and would not be bound to the same construction schedules.

"We're not changing anything in the [development] plan but simply striking a division line," Frank said. "The east side is raring to go."

He added that he does not know when National Fruit wants to start construction of the westside parcels.

The entire Fairmont Greens development would become part of Winchester's recently created Cider Hill Neighborhood Design District (NDD), where special property zonings have been put in place to encourage the development of homes, stores, restaurants and offices in the city's North End.

"We feel that this project ... was a little bit of a catalyst to let the NDD become what it has here at Cider Hill," Frank said.

However, the 2022 rezonings and development plans do not necessarily sync with Winchester's new NDD standards. Also, since the two property owners want to proceed independently, the commission raised concerns about the two sides working cooperatively to ensure Fairmont Greens remains true to its original designs while complying with NDD regulations.

Planning Commission member Mark Dyck made a motion to table the request to split the parcels into two sides in order to give the property owners more time to answer questions raised by the commission regarding Fairmont Greens' plans for parking, the creation of greenspace and improvements on Fairmont Avenue, but the motion failed due to lack of a second.

Commissioner Sandra Bloom followed that with a motion to forward the matter to City Council with a recommendation of denial "because the 10.9-acre rezoning [revision] request does not represent good planning practice." That motion was unanimously approved.

The earliest City Council could consider the Planning Commission's recommendation is Tuesday evening, when it will meet in Rouss City Hall.

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