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Cedar Valley Square project back on track

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star

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Site work is expected to resume next week for the Cedar Valley Square project on Valley Avenue in Winchester.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

After a month of stagnation, the redevelopment of the former Ward Plaza property in Winchester is ready to resume.

"The project is fully funded and moving forward," Winchester Economic Development Authority (EDA) Executive Director Jeff Buettner said on Thursday evening, "and I'm glad to say there was no city bailout."

Buettner added that all the lenders who have issued loans for Ward Plaza's redevelopment "are satisfied that all the funds necessary to complete the horizontal are in place." (Horizontal construction is ground-level work on roads, sidewalks, utilities and other things needed to support residential and commercial buildings.)

Most importantly, a mechanic's lien that had been filed in Winchester Circuit Court against the project's general contractor, Chesapeake Contracting Group Inc. of Owings Mill, Maryland, has been satisfied, Buettner said, clearing the way for work to resume.

The lien was filed on Sept. 10 by subcontractor LCS Site Services LLC of Springfield, which had been hired by Chesapeake Contracting Group to prepare the former Ward Plaza property, in the 2200 block of Valley Avenue, to accommodate a major mixed-use development called Cedar Valley Square.

A mechanic's lien is a legal claim that can be filed by contractors, subcontractors or material providers who have not been paid for their services. According to the Code of Virginia, a plaintiff can take temporary possession of a work site until payment is made, which is why work stopped last month at the former Ward Plaza property.

Buettner said the property owner and developer behind Cedar Valley Square, Winchester Acquisition Partners LLC, last week released funds to Chesapeake Contracting so that it could pay LCS the \$3,513,752.47 it was owed for preparing the 22-acre Cedar Valley Square site. Over the past few months, LCS had cleared away the demolished Ward Plaza shopping center and readied the grounds for infrastructure implementation and building construction.

"You will see subs being mobilized starting as early as Monday," Buettner said, referring to additional subcontractors hired by Chesapeake who are being brought in for the Ward Plaza redevelopment. " People will be on site, equipment will start rolling in towards the end of the week and into the following week."

Cedar Valley Square is proposed to include 453 apartments, condominiums and townhouses plus retail stores, offices, parking lots and a four-story, 376-stall parking garage that would be open to the public. To date, the only tenant announced for the mixed-use development is Publix, a grocery store that plans to utilize a 50,000-square-foot building to be constructed on an approximately 5-acre parcel within the 22-acre Cedar Valley Square site.

Buettner confirmed on Thursday that Publix is still committed to Winchester and plans on opening its Cedar Valley Square store sometime next year.

"Publix has been engaged in the conversations as we went through this rocky point," Buettner said, noting that the pad site for the grocery store in Cedar Valley Square is almost ready for construction to begin.

Cedar Valley Square has been in the works since June 1, 2024, when Winchester Acquisition Partners — an investment group headed by John Wesley Gray Jr. of McLean and Tom Glatzel of the Maryland-based firm WMH Development LLC — bought Ward Plaza, which opened in 1962 and had decades of prosperity until it

lost its anchor store, Montgomery Ward, in March 2001. From that point on, Ward Plaza fell into disrepair and struggled to fill its store fronts until Winchester Acquisition Partners demolished the shopping center in July 2025.

Winchester Acquisition Partners paid \$10 million for the 19.6-acre Ward Plaza property and \$975,000 for an adjacent 2.6-acre parcel of vacant land at 330 Hope Drive. To help the investment group make the purchases, the Winchester EDA obtained a \$4 million loan on Winchester Acquisition Partners' behalf with the understanding that the developer would pay back the EDA in monthly installments until the debt is settled.

"That loan [payment] is current," Buettner said, adding that Winchester Acquisition Partners has already paid off about \$600,000 of the \$4 million debt. "The next payment's due December 1st."

Buettner added that Winchester Acquisition Partners' agreement with the EDA calls for it to take some of the proceeds from upcoming land sales within its 22-acre Cedar Valley Square site and use that money to pay off the remainder of the \$4 million loan.

"By summer of next year, our loan will be paid off in its entirety," Buettner said.

Some Winchester residents objected when the EDA obtained the \$4 million loan for Winchester Acquisition Partners due to fear of the city having to use tax proceeds to cover the debt if the loan isn't repaid. The only way that could happen, Buettner said, is if the EDA, which does not use tax dollars but instead generates its own revenues through property deals and fees, did not have enough money to pay off the loan and had to ask City Council to release funds from its coffers.

Additional questions were raised because Gray obtained a separate \$4.7 million loan from the Bank of Clarke to finance development of Cedar Valley Square, which was on top of a previously issued \$8.7 million loan to his investment group. Even in a worst-case scenario where the Cedar Valley Square project is canceled, Buettner said the EDA and City Council would not be responsible for paying off anything more than the EDA's \$4 million loan.

Even more concerns were shared when, in April 2025, City Council authorized the issuance of \$29 million in bonds to make improvements to the Cedar Valley Square site and the land around it. While some people speculated that the additional bonds were obtained to finance the mixed-use development's construction, Buettner said they were actually needed to make significant road and infrastructure upgrades and develop a 4-acre public park inside a 92-acre area along Valley Avenue that includes Cedar Valley Square.

The 92 acres comprise the Cedar Valley Neighborhood Design District, where city officials hope to create a walkable community and attract further development. Tax proceeds from the homes and businesses in the forthcoming Cedar Valley Square will be used to pay off the \$29 million debt.

When asked if he anticipated any more hiccups with the Cedar Valley Square project, Buettner said: "I wish my crystal ball was that accurate. I will say that on these types of projects, there's a lot of moving parts. They're complicated."

While he can't guarantee the project's completion, Buettner said he is "very satisfied with where we are."

"It is fully financed and there are contingency funds in place ... so I don't see any further financial problems," he said. "Everyone I've talked to ... is 100% confident they can hit the timelines."

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