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Public forum planned on Lucent redevelopment

Discussions ongoing on future of building, 472-acre site

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HOLMDEL— In response to concerns from residents, township officials assured the community that progress is being made on the redevelopment of the 472-acre Alcatel Lucent property and that public hearings will be held in the near future.

The Township Committee discussed at a meeting on Feb. 17 that the plan for the rehabilitation of the vacant 2 million-squarefoot Bell Labs building is still being negotiated and talks are moving forward.

“Being the only one up here sitting on that [Lucent] subcommittee, I can tell you that the plan is highly malleable,” said Township Attorney Duane O. Davison, in response to a resident. “It is not locked in stone and it is not anywhere near locked in stone. This is a coming together of elements, and there will be public hearings and public forums.”

The current plan, proposed by contract purchaser Somerset Development, Lakewood, calls for 100 residential units and a 125-unit hotel inside the building, as well as mixed-use commercial space such as hospitality and medical wellness centers.

As discussions with the township’s Lucent subcommittee and the developer continue, the number of housing units outside the building was negotiated down to 30 units in 2010, from 398 units in 2009 and 600 units in 2008.

Although the exact type of housing has not been determined yet, Deputy Mayor Serena DiMaso said the governing body is aiming to make the units age-targeted to attract residents “such as a young couple or an older couple that is retired,” she said.

“It should not lend itself to families,” Di- Maso added.

Resident Vitaly Kuleshov questioned why the negotiations about the property have not been held in open session.

Davison said the developer has executed confidentiality agreements, and certain matters cannot be discussed until both parties agree to make them public.

“There are confidentiality agreements between Mr. [Somerset Development President Ralph] Zucker and the various substantial retailers and other businesses ... office, research, that are being discussed and being negotiated by Mr. Zucker for that property. Those could be shared with the subcommittee on the basis that we do not indicate what they are or who those businesses are.”

Davison expressed frustration with editorials in the daily media that called for openness in the negotiating process for the Lucent property, and he explained that the township is constrained by the confidentiality agreement with the developer.

“We couldn’t do that if we held this in Giants Stadium and everyone could observe it. There would be no discussions and there would be no progress, and what is the potential for happening [in that situation] is that building being torn down and the property being put in farmland assessment. Is it real that would happen? ... I don’t know, but it is definitely a possibility.”

The property, owned by Alcatel-Lucent, is zoned for office, laboratory and farmland. The municipality only has control over the property through zoning, DiMaso said.

The governing body is currently weighing all options regarding the reuse of the site by making sure the potential tax revenues generated by the property are not negated by expenses to the municipality, Committeeman Larry Fink explained.

“I assure you, once we come to a semblance of an agreement on uses that the governing body believes will benefit the town [and] will not compromise the semi-rural nature of this center of Holmdel, ... we will have our professionals do a very thorough analysis of any final proposal to ensure the traffic impacts will not mean widening of roads or installing new traffic lights or generate too many schoolchildren,” Fink said. “We will be looking at it very carefully.”

Mayor Patrick Impreveduto and Committeeman Rocco Pascucci are the township’s representatives on the Lucent subcommittee. At the Jan. 3 township reorganization meeting, Impreveduto said he was “optimistic” that 2011 would bring “substantial progress” on the redevelopment of the site.

As the governing body continues to reach a resolution for the property, additional public hearings will be held to provide an opportunity for residents to voice their opinions about the proposal, similar to public forums held in 2008 and 2009, according to DiMaso.

The building, designed by Eero Saarinen and listed on the New Jersey Register of Historic Places, was closed and listed for sale by Lucent in 2006. Before Somerset contracted to buy the property from Lucent in 2008, a previous proposal by Preferred

Real Estate Investments, a Pennsylvania-based developer, called for a corporate campus and age-restricted housing on the land.

“Because this a complex — to say the least— process, and a very long process, as we get to a point with the developer where we think we are getting reasonably close, it might be a good idea to hold some type of a public forum,” Fink said. “At that time, let people have the opportunity to understand a little bit better what has transpired to date, what we are thinking, what the developer is thinking, and give the people the opportunity to give us some feedback. We have all been getting phone calls, e-mails with questions, and we haven’t had the opportunity to share ideas.”

Davison said the township has made “great progress” on reaching an accord with the developer and property owner.

“What you have to do when negotiating this is balance all of those possibilities, and you are in negotiations,” Davison said. “Do you know what the other side will do? No, that’s part of what negotiations are made of. What you have to do is use your level-best judgment in attempting to make sure this is returned as a desirable ratable, not sacrificing the quality of life for this town, yet restoring ratables. That’s the mission.”