

Firm: 300 homes needed to make Lucent viable

Residents say they'd rather have tax increase than acres of new housing

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HOLMDEL — Give us housing or we're busting down the old Bell Labs building.

This was the overall message from Preferred Real Estate Investments June 19, during the developer's community outreach meeting held at the Senior Center on Crawfords Corner Road.

Michael O'Neill, president and CEO of Preferred, told audience members that his company needed to build at least 300 housing units on the site in order "to make the project work."

"This project could not be profitable on just 240 units," O'Neill said. "That would not be profitable."

He added, "I just don't believe we can make it work with all commercial."

O'Neill said he would keep part or all of the historic mirrored building if the township will allow him to build housing on the commercially zoned land. If not, he would tear down the structure and replace it with between 1.1 million and 1.9 million square feet of new office space. When asked, O'Neill said the vacant property now represents a tax risk to Holmdel residents.

The audience reaction was overwhelmingly in favor of a no-housing approach to the project, with the notable exception of resident Agnes King, who said she wished to buy one of O'Neill's age-restricted units, were they ever to be built. King, who is active in the township, has made this comment several times at past meetings. Still, most were adamantly against the idea of housing.

"Preferred needs to be aware that Holmdel is an affluent and fundamentally conservative community," said resident Larry Jackal. "We like the town the way it is and are not interested in seeing it changed in profound ways. We are also a well-educated and politically sophisticated community. And we know how to do math. We know that the taxes no longer generated by the Lucent property increased our tax bill by only \$25 per month for the average homeowner. And we don't believe that building houses on that site will improve our tax situation."

Jim McCorkel, co-president of local group



PHOTOS BY KAREN BOWES

These concept plans of the former Lucent property were on display during the June 21 "community outreach" meeting hosted by Preferred Real Estate Investments, contractor of the site.



Citizens for Informed Land Use (CILU), also called for a no-housing approach. While reading a prepared statement on behalf of his organization, McCorkel reminded O'Neill that during the March 22 public hearing on the topic, the Township Committee unanimously agreed to ask Preferred to resubmit its development plan with no housing.

"If it takes a few years for the metropolitan New York and New Jersey market for office building to improve," McCorkel said, "what Holmdel taxpayers have at risk meantime is a comparatively modest 1.52 percent of the total tax base. We will still

have 475 acres of beautiful land within 50 miles of New York City awaiting a redeveloper whose vision for the future is in harmony with our citizens' desire to retain Holmdel's magical open spaces."

Despite this, O'Neill said he plans to submit a mixed-use plan.

"I think we will submit a mixed-use proposal and go down that road," O'Neill said.

And if the zoning change is rejected?

"We'll see what happens," O'Neill said.

O'Neill spent the majority of his presentation showing the audience computer renderings of his five top design options for the site. Option one, his favorite, includes 300

housing units and 1.5 million square feet of commercial space. Option two showed a similar plan but with 240 housing units. Option three included no residential, but had the Bell Labs building replaced with about a dozen one-story buildings, incorporating a total of 1.1 million square feet of office space. Option four also showed no residential, but had the highest density of commercial space with 1.9 million square feet divided among roughly one dozen two- and three-story buildings. Finally, option five included 200 residential units and 1.5 million square feet of commercial space.

The majority of the housing units would be a mixture of two-, three- and four-bedroom single-family homes for age-restricted adults, O'Neill said. There would also be about 10 non-age-restricted single-family homes as well. O'Neill said age-restricted homes would not put a burden on the township's school system.

But several residents questioned why senior citizens would want to buy a three- or four-bedroom home, while others pointed out that age-restricted housing may one day become a thing of the past.

One township official present said the developer does not have Holmdel's best interests in mind.

"I don't like the options that were given tonight," Committeeman Larry Fink said after the meeting. "There's a lot that wasn't said tonight about economic and quality-of-life impacts. Mr. O'Neill spoke in generalities: 'We need a residential component to make the site work.' What he's really saying is he wants to build on as many acres of the property as he can get away with and maximize profits. I think most residents value the openness of the property more than they want to see it maximally developed for some elusive and probably small reduction in their tax bill."

Attendance at the meeting was noticeably less than at the March 22 meeting, which featured a standing-room-only crowd at the Holmdel Senior Center. In comparison, only about 75 people attended the June 19 meeting, with Fink the lone Township Committee member present.

Preferred Spokesman Jon Bjornson said the company sent out letters of invitation to the committee and direct neighbors of the site.

"It's very disingenuous of them to do that," resident John Rusein said of the way the meeting was publicized. "This meeting, nobody knows about it."