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Holmdel green-lights development plan for former Bell Labs building

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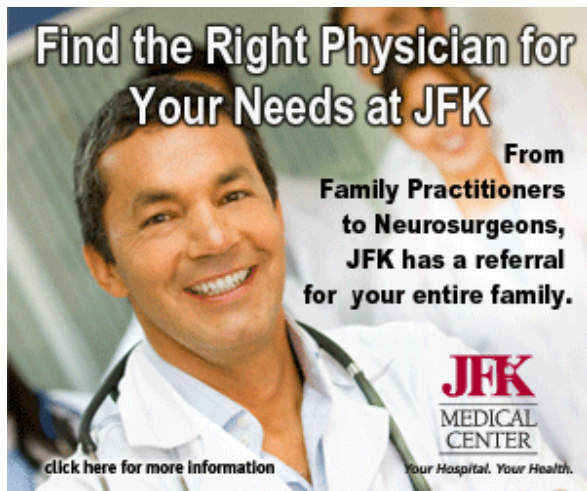
HOLMDEL -- After standing vacant for seven years, the iconic former Bell Labs building in Holmdel will see new life.

On July 30 the Township Planning Board unanimously approved Somerset Development's plans to reposition the 2-million-square-foot building as a mixed-use town center, incorporating medical, office, retail and other uses under one very large roof.

"It feels great," said Somerset President Ralph Zucker, who has been attempting to preserve and repurpose the Eero Saarinen-designed building since 2007. "We're glad that the board recognizes the need to reposition this signature building and signature space ... It's been a long haul, but the hard work is only beginning. We're probably looking at close to a decade of more work."

In addition to granting Somerset approval to repurpose the building, the board also approved the Lakewood-based developer's plans to subdivide the 472-acre building site and make relatively minor improvements to its entryways, exits, interior roadways and 4,900 existing parking spaces.

Somerset successfully petitioned for a number of variances and design waivers in its application, most of which stemmed from existing conditions in or around the 50-year-old building. The developer agreed to collaborate with township professionals on some specific issues going forward, including signage and additional landscaping throughout the site.



The decision followed six hours of combined testimony over two hearings, during which Somerset's traffic, engineering and planning experts detailed how the building site would be updated to accommodate a new influx of tenants, employees, visitors and customers.

Residents expressed concerns over a number of issues, most prominently the potential traffic and safety impacts the repurposed building could have on surrounding communities and roadways.

Following the board's decision, resident Ralph Blumenthal said the board should have spent more than two hearings deliberating over such a significant proposal.

"To see the building reused, that's a plus for the building, the property and the town," he said. "But I'm disappointed with the overall process and the way it's been run ... Most of the planning board members didn't ask a single question."

Somerset professionals responded directly to most public comments, assuring residents that the planned uses would not impact Holmdel any more than the building's former incarnation as a daily home to nearly 6,000 office employees.

In addition to Somerset's comprehensive traffic study, which board professionals said they had thoroughly vetted, the developer and the township have also agreed to collaboratively monitor nearby traffic conditions in real time as the project moves forward, identifying the need for possible traffic-signal timing adjustments and other changes. Somerset professionals said the developer would pay a "fair share" contribution toward any necessary improvements.

After years of false starts and stalled plans from two different developers, Planning Board Chairman Thomas King said Somerset's latest proposal succeeded because of the developer's willingness to work in concert with the township.

"They have been very cooperative with what we have asked them to do," he said. "The big thing was trying to keep the existing building. Everybody wanted to keep that, which Zucker agreed to and is hopefully going to develop into a good enterprise."

The repositioning of the building is only the first phase of Somerset's overall redevelopment plan for the site. The next phase, which will also have to come before the planning board, would involve the construction of up to 225 luxury homes on the outlying edges of the property.

Acknowledging that the process could take "a few months," Zucker said Somerset planned to start work on phase one as soon as possible. Some possible tenants, he said, may be announced in the near future.

"This really is a plan that was done in concert with the community," he said, referring to multiple open houses and public meetings Somerset conducted with Holmdel residents throughout recent years. "You can't please all the people all of the time, but we hope that we have pleased a lot of the people so far with this forward-looking plan. The proof is in the pudding as we move forward."

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