

Mayor: Holmdel controls zoning of Bell Labs site

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Talks on with new buyers; Somerset Development out

BYMIKE DAVIS, Independent, November 10, 2011

Staff Writer



With a potential new buyer in negotiations with Alcatel Lucent to purchase the former Bell Labs property, Holmdel officials maintain that they have leverage in any plan to develop the site .

“What the people have to understand is that we still control that property. It’s still zoned. We control everything with our zoning,” Mayor Patrick Impreveduto said in a Nov. 3 interview.

“I know, and the Township Committee knows, what the people of Holmdel want to see on that property, and we’ll be diligent to see that’s what goes there.”

A representative for Alcatel-Lucent confirmed last week that there is a potential new buyer for the 472- acre site, effectively ending the involvement of Somerset Development, Lakewood, which had been negotiating with the technology giant for more than three years. “We are in conversations with another buyer, but we can’t disclose the name at this point,” Alcatel-Lucent spokeswoman Mary Ward said on Nov. 3.

Ward said the new buyer offered a higher price for the property on Crawfords Corner Road, but that Alcatel-Lucent gave Somerset the chance to match it.

“At this point, we are really focusing on this other buyer,” Ward said.

The property is zoned for office and laboratory use, as well as farmland. Somerset Development proposed mixed-use of the iconic former Bell Labs headquarters, including a “town square,” retail space, hotel and a university component.

Representatives for Somerset Development did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Impreveduto said he had a chance meeting with the group of potential owners in August. When asked what their vision for the site is, they mentioned a sports complex or camp, in addition to a hotel and office space as possibilities.

“That was a fleeting conversation in August and we haven’t had any contact with them since,” Impreveduto said.

“Lucent has a confidentiality agreement with them, so we’re not 100 percent in the picture. I call the Lucent representative at least once a week to see if they’ve come up with a plan yet, and they have not come up with anything concrete.”

Ward said that if the property is sold, the new buyers would have to develop and present their proposal for the property, much like Somerset Development had done over the past three years.

“The potential buyers will have to work with the town and present their proposal,” Ward said.

“We do believe that their proposal is closer to the ... report the town had commissioned. It’s closer to what they were looking for, but we’ll have to go through that process.”

In 2009 the township commissioned a study to investigate different uses of the property. The report suggested demolishing the existing 2 million-square-foot Alcatel-Lucent building and listed a range of possible uses, including a private 18-hole golf course, homes, an equestrian center, movie studio, and pedestrian or bicycle trails along Ramanessin Brook.

In June the Township Committee protested the Department of Environmental

Protection’s (DEP) Wastewater Management Plan, which proposed extending sewer service to the entire Alcatel-Lucent tract in what many

opponents said was a precursor to high-volume housing development on the property.

Impreveduto stressed that the township still insists that there not be a high volume of homes built on the property, regardless of the Wastewater Management Plan.

“Even if the whole property gets sewered, we still have the zoning rights to that property. We can still pretty much dictate how many homes go there,” Impreveduto said.

“What [sewering the property] will do is make the property more salable for Lucent. That remains to be seen. But the battle is not yet lost by Holmdel, and I’m not willing to concede that it is. In my mind’s eye, it’s still no more than 30 homes going into that property.”

Building homes on the property has been a contentious issue throughout the entire process of redeveloping the Alcatel-Lucent tract, which officials have said could bring in \$4.7 million in ratables.

In 2008, Somerset Development introduced a plan to build 600 homes on the property. That number decreased as negotiations continued, down to 398 in 2009 and 100 homes in early 2011 before the developer announced at a public information session in June that no more than 30 homes would be built on the property.

At the Township Committee’s Oct. 20 meeting, Impreveduto said that the committee has completed a rehabilitation plan with Alcatel-Lucent and is working on a redevelopment plan that reflects the township’s preferences for what would go on the property.

“But that was between us and Lucent. We made it broad enough, just in case Somerset fell by the wayside, just in case somebody else came in. It’s broad enough to cover the idea of what we want there,” he said.

The Holmdel Township Committee is next scheduled to meet on Thursday, Nov. 17.