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New chapter for Bell Labs complex

By KEITH HEUMILLER

Staff Writer



The former Bell Labs complex will be preserved and repurposed for the future under an agreement between Holmdel Township and Somerset Development.

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redevelopment agreement for the site.

From cell phones to the Big Bang theory, Holmdel has played a role in some of the most significant innovations and discoveries of the past century.

And while the 472-acre Bell Labs complex that bred Nobel Prize winners and groundbreaking research will forever hold a unique place in American history, the now-vacant Crawfords Corner Road property faces a much different future.

On Aug. 20, after months of negotiations, the Holmdel Township Committee and Lakewood-based Somerset Development took a significant step toward filling in the blanks of that future by signing off on a long-awaited

“With this plan, we can sustain a vital piece of New Jersey’s history — if not the country’s history — and revitalize it,” Somerset President Ralph Zucker said on Aug. 26.

The agreement — a legal document that lays out specific requirements for the long-term redevelopment of the site and its 2 million-square-foot office building — represents the furthest a developer has come toward taking control of the property since it was vacated by Alcatel-Lucent in 2006.

Over the last six years, Somerset and two other potential developers proposed plans for the site, but each faced a surge of public resistance over a range of different concerns.

The first potential developer proposed razing parts of the iconic Eero Saarinen-designed building to make way for a new multi-facility office park and residential housing.

Holmdel residents — many of whom had worked in the building as Bell Labs and Alcatel-Lucent employees — organized opposition to the proposal and called for the building to be preserved. Grassroots groups were formed, joining architects, engineers, designers, academics and professionals from throughout the state in a collaborative attempt to save the famed, mirror-glass building from the bulldozer. The tension continued after Somerset entered the picture in 2008. The township had commissioned a consulting firm to prepare a report on multiple possibilities for the property, and in January 2009 the firm recommended that the building be demolished. Residents and supporters continued to fight for the building, one of the last projects designed by the mind behind the St. Louis Arch.

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Somerset proposed a plan that sought to preserve the building, repositioning it as a mixed-use commercial center, but also called for as many as 600 residential units to be built on the edges of the property. The developer would spend nearly four years working with township officials and holding public forums for the plan, which appeased the building's advocates but generated a new wave of criticism over the potential impacts of the development.

Somerset and township officials eventually negotiated a plan that would include only 30 housing units. But in 2012, Miami-based developer Elsie Sterling Oversight LLC unexpectedly stepped in, reportedly offering Alcatel-Lucent a better deal and unseating Somerset as contract purchaser.

Public criticism began almost immediately, as residents expressed concerns over the origin of the LLC and its intentions for the property.

Months later, the township declared the property an “area in need of redevelopment” and approved an official redevelopment plan, effectively granting the town control over how the property could be used by a developer.

The plan expressly called for the preservation of the building, but also allowed for up to 225 residential units on the property as township officials acknowledged the economics of the situation.

“This project will not move without a housing component,” Mayor Patrick Impreveduto said at the

time.

However, the deal fell through due to financial complications the following fall, and Somerset re-entered the picture.

Since then, the developer has again engaged local residents and cultivated a “community focused” plan that preserves the building, benefits the township and incorporates many of the public concerns raised since 2007, Zucker said.

“Rather than just impose it on the community, we actually worked together with the community,” he said. “I look at this as the community’s plan, in a way.”

On Aug. 26, Impreveduto said this latest plan succeeded where so many others failed. He said this was due to a long collaboration between Somerset, the governing body and Holmdel residents.

“There is all of that history, and every time we had a forum there were concerns raised by the public,” he said. “We would address them in our committee meetings, our meetings with the developer and with the public.

“Not everybody gets what they want,” he added. “Everyone has to compromise ... but this is what the Township Committee believes is the best plan for the property.”

On July 31, Somerset received unanimous Planning Board approval for the first phase of its plan, which will bring health, wellness, medical, retail and other uses to the building, along with a hotel and conference center, and space for the Holmdel public library.”

The redevelopment agreement sets guidelines for the entire plan, and directly discusses a number of issues raised by concerned residents over the last six years.

Somerset, for example, is prohibited from “significantly altering the historical appearance” of the building’s exterior, and is required to spend at least \$2 million on the building alone.

Zucker said that figure is “a drop in the bucket” when compared to what Somerset plans to inject into the future commercial center.

“Our profitability is totally dependent on the successful repurposing of the building,” he said.

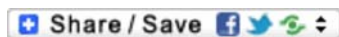
Somerset will be required to meet regularly with township officials and a newly formed Redevelopment Plan Committee to ensure all requirements are being met. These include an ongoing traffic impact-monitoring program that residents supported during the Planning Board process.

Township officials have said the redevelopment will ultimately generate millions of dollars in new tax revenue for the township.

Impeveduto said that after years of planning and negotiations, both the agreement and the proposed plans reflect the long-term vision of the township.

“We got pretty much everything we were looking for,” he said.

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