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Framingham: Planners offer new vision for Nobscot plaza

FRAMINGHAM – As planners Monday shared a new vision for a rundown Nobscot shopping plaza, enraged residents said they still want a supermarket as a major tenant.

As part of an ongoing economic development study, planners from The Cecil Group said they'd like to see Framingham change its zoning to allow a mixed-use housing development to replace the mostly vacant Nobscot Shopping Center.

The idea struck a nerve with a large crowd of residents, who repeatedly interrupted the presentation with objections and refused to break into smaller discussion groups.

Planner Steve Cecil and Town Manager Bob Halpin appealed to residents to consider mixed use as the most feasible way to “unlock the plaza” and get the players who control it to make improvements.

“We’re trying to engage you on a way out of the abandoned shopping center to something you’ll be happy about,” Halpin told the nearly 100 residents who met at Heritage at Framingham.

The plaza at the crossroads of Edgell Road and Water Street sits largely empty, with the parent company of Shaw’s holding a long-term master lease to prevent competition from other grocers.

Cecil said the parties controlling the property are open to redevelopment if it makes good financial sense, and said the demand in Nobscot is for housing — and specifically, apartments.

“It’s not a grocery store,” Halpin said. “It’s not a big shopping center that we saw 20 years ago.”

Residents objected to the possibility of 184 housing units and some shops and possible offices, but eventually warmed to the idea of change.

Mike Gatlin, chairman of the town’s Economic Development and Industrial Corp., assured residents it wouldn’t be a “megalopolis in the center of Nobscot.”

Gatlin said the town is trying to protect and even help define the village nature of Nobscot, and fix the “eyesore that has every one of you understandably upset.”

To applause, he said the plaza’s redevelopment would not mean hundreds of “yuppies” moving into the neighborhood.

The EDIC and its consultant, The Cecil Group, sought public comment for a study on the village commercial centers in Nobscot and nearby Saxonville. Monday’s meeting was the third and final public workshop in Nobscot. The last one in Saxonville is this Thursday at 7 p.m. at Stapleton Elementary School.

In addition to rezoning to allow for mixed-use development, Cecil and project manager Josh Fiala said their draft recommendations for Nobscot also include streetscape improvements, connecting the village’s recreational spots, making improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists, improving turning space for drivers at the four corners and promoting arts and culture, including through an annual event.

Cecil compared the redevelopment vision for Nobscot’s plaza to the mixed-use Wayland Town Center project, and said it could feature shops and a restaurant.

Zoning changes would require a two-thirds vote of approval from Town Meeting, and individual projects would then go to town boards for approval.

Jan Dash, a Nobscot resident since 1980, said she is mainly concerned about traffic but she has come around to the realization that the village won’t get back a supermarket.

After hearing the presentation, she said she is happy there is hope for change at the once bustling, but now run-down plaza.

“It makes our neighborhood look like a slum and it’s a nice neighborhood,” she said.

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A meeting on plans for the moribund Nobscot Shopping Center drew around 100 residents Monday night to the Heritage at Framingham. Daily News Staff Photo/Danielle Ameden

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