

Developer eyes Agawam site

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AGAWAM - A Connecticut developer is proposing a retail project for the same 88 acres off Tennis Road that were the focus of controversy three years ago when a 563,000-square-foot shopping center was rejected for the site, according to a lawyer representing the property owner.

That project, known as the Agawam Pavilion, was defeated in November 2005 when city voters rejected a zone change for the property and a zoning ordinance amendment that would have allowed the development of a multi-building shopping center.

Bradford R. Martin, of the Springfield law firm Morrison, and Mahoney said a strong effort would be made "not to repeat the mistakes that were made last time" in trying to persuade the community that the new project would be good for Agawam.

Martin declined to name the developer involved, but said it was not National Realty & Development Corp., the company that proposed the Agawam Pavilion project.

Martin represents the owner of the 88 acres off Tennis Road, Agawam Real Estate Investors Inc. Elliot S. Jaffe, of Suffern, N.Y., founder of the national Dress Barn clothing chain, owns Agawam Real Estate Investors Inc., officials said.

In the spring Martin met with newly elected Mayor Susan R. Dawson and with the city's Director of Planning and Community Development Deborah S. Dachos, he said, "to try to work together to put something in there that would be of benefit to the town, and that would be viable."

Martin said the proposed project would be a retail use that would include several tenants, most likely including one larger anchor store.

Contrary to local rumors, he said, a Wal-Mart store has not been part of any discussions on what to build at the Tennis Road site.

A Wal-Mart would hurt local businesses, Dawson said. "It's not even something I would bring to the table," she said. "It would blight existing shopping centers, and I wouldn't do that."

Martin acknowledged that the traffic and other concerns that sunk the Agawam Pavilion project would have to be addressed better this time around if any project were going to be approved for the site.

"There are very few sites that are picture perfect, that don't have some attendant problems for development," he said.

Dawson plans to meet Tuesday with the developer, a real estate broker, Dachos, City Councilor Jill S. Messick and Corinne M. Wingard, who serves on several city boards and is chairwoman of the Go Green

Agawam Committee, an environmental group.

Two other invitees - School Committee Vice-Chairman Anthony C. Bonavita and City Councilor Joseph Mineo - declined to attend, saying they did not want to be associated with a commercial project for the Tennis Road property.

Saying he thought the city should evaluate the developer's proposal, Bonavita added, however, "I don't want a misperception that I'm in favor of something that at this point I'm not in favor of."

With the proposed site so near Agawam High School and the Agawam Public Library, Bonavita said he had concerns - as he did with the Agawam Pavilion project - that already-difficult traffic problems in that area would only be made worse by putting a retail complex there.

Saying he had similar concerns, Mineo said, "The people spoke. They clearly spoke three years ago, and here we are again."

"I want to emphasize (that) I'm not against retail. I'm against the location," Mineo said.

Messick, who was a member of Citizens Against Reckless Development, which fought the Agawam Pavilion project, said she would keep an open mind going into Tuesday's discussions.

"I'm not making any comments until I sit down and talk with the builders," Messick said.

Wingard, who also plans to attend Tuesday's meeting, said she too opposed the project proposed three years ago.

Saying she believes Dawson "has the best interests of the town at heart," Wingard said she remains open to a new proposal "if it's appropriate to the town, and it doesn't bring more problems than it solves."

Dawson, who said she has sought to promote a positive business climate in Agawam in the face of the nation's economic struggles, said the new proposal should at least be evaluated.

"Even in these tough economic times, I still have dreams for this town," she said. "It'll be a very sad day if we lose positive development for our town because people won't even come to the table."