

Development of historic grist mill is subject of hearing

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SIMSBURY — A restaurant may once again occupy the historic grist mill on West Street, and new housing might be constructed on the other side of Hop Brook.

Such are two features of a potential mixed-use development at 75-77 West St. and Lots 19 and 24 on Grist Mill Road. A total of about 20 acres would be developed.

An informal presentation on the proposal was made at the Zoning Commission meeting June 21 and at both the Planning Commission and Design Review Board meetings on June 22 by representatives of Landworks Development, the Farmington firm working with property owner Ensign-Bickford Realty Corporation.

Landworks previously approached the land use boards about the proposal, but the town's Planned Area Development (PAD) zone, which was needed for the type of development proposed, had not yet been approved.

"Now that it's come to fruition, we can hopefully put together an application," said builder Chris Nelson of Nelson Construction, a partner in Landworks Development, LLC along with developer Ron Janeczko, at the zoning meeting.

The plan calls for renovation of the 300-year-old grist and saw mill building, with an approximate 7,000-square-foot restaurant and about 6,000 square feet of office space. There might also be a community room in the building for residents of the new housing units to gather.

The restaurant would be on two levels, with a pub below.

"We know that everyone would like to have a restaurant there again," Nelson said. "The site is gorgeous and is rich in tradition."

The plan allows for 66 parking spaces and there's an overflow area to add 12 more spaces if needed.



HOP BROOK *Simsbury, Connecticut*



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—Ron Janeczko

Landworks would construct three new clusters of housing — one with town homes for purchase and two for rentals.

“We’re picking up the character and style of the old mill building,” Nelson said.

Five buildings with a total of 20 town homes would be built close to the grist mill. Beyond there, on the Grist Mill Road property, 78 rental units would be built on two different parcels; six buildings with 12 units each and six other buildings with one unit each. Both one- and two-bedroom units are included in the plans, and sizes are in the range of 1,000 to 1,400 square feet.

“Offices in the area love the idea, hoping that their employees might want to live there,” Nelson said.

He was referring to office buildings that exist on Grist Mill Road and at the ends of Mill Pond Lane and Werk Way. Grist Mill Road is off of West Street, and both Mill Pond Lane and Werk Way are off of Grist Mill Road. The new development would stretch back as far as Werk Way.

“Many people are looking for modern, energy-efficient homes today,” Janeczko said in a phone interview June 24. “We’re thinking that with the proximity to the high school, we may draw some teachers.”

A tunnel may also be built to allow residents of the new housing units access to where a covered footbridge brings walkers over water to the grist mill. The bridge offers a view of the brook to one side, and a waterfall and pond to the other.

Then, by crossing the bridge to the grist mill and exiting the building’s front entrance, pedestrians can easily walk down West Street to Hopmeadow Street to reach the center of town, Janeczko noted.

The development will be more urban than rural, what with offices, residences and a restaurant, he said, and architecturally, it will give the feel of downtown.

“Everything is so spread out now so we’re dependent on cars, but why not put homes near where you shop and work that you can walk to?” Janeczko posed.

“People had it figured out years ago,” he added, reflecting on how things used to be in West Hartford Center when folks lived and worked in the same area where they shopped.

“It’s a very exciting time for development,” Janeczko said. “Municipalities and developers are seeing that this is smarter growth.”

He said infrastructure that exists at the site, including sewage and utilities, works well with their site plan.

“Our greatest challenges and rewards are one and the same,” Janeczko said. “This is a very positive experience.”

They decided to get involved in this development because “every single project is a new opportunity, and when this kind of property becomes available, it’s unique,” he said. “The grist mill is historic and revered in town. We want to do something there everyone can be proud of.”

Construction would be done in phases, Nelson told the Zoning Commission, “but the phasing will be quick within a two-year period.” The restaurant and office space would be built first, followed by the town homes and finally, the rentals, he said.

“I think you’re on the right track and I would encourage you to keep going,” Zoning Commissioner Bruce Elliott said at the June 21 meeting.

“We’re looking for an informal nod so we can go forward with an application,” Nelson said. “Our intent is to move forward since I didn’t hear any objections.”

The next night, both the Planning Commission and Design Review Board (DRB) had favorable comments on the proposal, and the DRB offered some comments, Director of Planning Hiram Peck said by phone June 24.

“They suggested some suggested changes regarding the

shape and size of the buildings,” he said. “Landworks is working on those suggestions, and I think will submit an application soon. They’re anxious to go forward.”

The application will be the first one submitted for consideration under the new PAD zone regulation.