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Frederick Towne Mall will be demolished

Owner's representative admits it's 'a piece of junk' during meeting on Golden Mile revitalization

by Tripp Laino | Staff Writer

The Frederick Towne Mall is in line for demolition, according to its owner.

Steven Ifshin, chairman of DLC Management Corporation, which owns the Frederick Towne Mall, spoke at a city workshop Tuesday night to update residents on plans for the mall.

Ifshin said he was in the midst of negotiating with two "traditional retailers" interested in renting the space, but he could not disclose the names of the businesses or the types of store for fear of jeopardizing negotiations.

He said the mall would be torn down in order to create space for these new retailers.

"It's a piece of junk, I understand that," he said. "But I think a little while longer is not going to hurt anything. ... I'm tearing it down because it's not usable anymore. We're ready to take on the project and make it a viable project."

The plan for demolition isn't new, according to Richard Griffin, director of the city's Department of Economic Development.

Griffin said it has been in the works for "several years," and the city has a master plan for reconstruction that calls for keeping The Home Depot, Boscov's and Bon-Ton, and adding two other mixed-use commercial buildings.

He acknowledged that Bon-Ton's recent closure could change the plan, he said.

But demolition seems to have forward progress, according to Ifshin, who would not provide specifics on costs, financing, or a timeline, only that he hoped progress would come within three months.

He also apologized for the length of time it's taken to complete the changes to the mall as stores left in droves.

"The redevelopment of the shopping center is a complicated process because of the existing logistics of what's there," he said. "...I apologize for the time it's taken for a viable plan to update the Frederick Towne Mall. Almost every retailer you'd want to go in Frederick is already here."

Nick Colonna, manager of the City of Frederick's comprehensive planning, said the chief complaint from many residents of the city's Golden Mile region is problems at the Frederick Towne Mall. And while only a handful of the 25 people who attended the workshop spoke, at least one person said he is in favor of seeing any type of change come to that area.

Christopher Mattia, who lives near the Golden Mile, urged the city during Tuesday night's meeting to allow property owners to do any upgrade that they see fit. He said the city was misguided in attempting to

make the Golden Mile look like downtown Frederick.

"If we wanted a spot that looked like downtown, we'd go downtown," he said. "I don't find anything wrong with Route 40 except the property owners can't do what they want to do with it in a timely and affordable fashion. I don't blame the owners for that, it's the process."

The discussion came as part of a series of workshops designed to help formulate plans for addressing the myriad problems with Frederick's Golden Mile, which has been a source of resident complaints as retailers leave the area.

The Golden Mile, also known as U.S. Route 40, is a roughly 3-mile corridor with the largest concentration of retail space in the city. The area has several problems, such as a high number of vacancies and a lack of connections between the shopping areas located adjacent to Route 40, according to Colonna.

To combat these problems, the city's planning department has been working with residents to come up with a small-area plan to address the area. The plan would be one that closely resembles the city's Comprehensive Plan — a 200-page document that includes detailed maps that outline the growth of the entire city during a 20-year timeframe — but with more focus.

The Golden Mile was identified as an area that could benefit from a more focused plan during surveys collected from the public in the city's comprehensive planning process. The small-area plan will address land use, transportation and other sectors based on what residents, property and business owners provide as their key desires to enhancing the quality of life in neighborhoods and business districts.

At the meeting Tuesday night, Colonna presented plans that divided the Golden Mile area into four districts, starting from the farthest west, where Route 40 and Alt. Route 40 converge, and moving east toward the city.

District C is the largest commercial area, located on the north side of Route 40, and includes the Frederick Towne Mall. There are 450 acres within the planning area, which encompasses more than 25 percent of the city's commercial land, and about 2.65 million square feet of commercial space, Colonna said.

The area is almost identical in size to the stretch of U.S. Route 40 that runs from the Great Frederick Fair grounds through to Frederick High School, with the Square Corner as its midpoint.

Colonna presented three different variations on plans to upgrade the area, starting with basic changes, focusing on upgraded façade and encouraging improved retail use, to a complex, long-ranging plan including road construction to link the various shopping centers in a more grid-like pattern, similar to the downtown district.

The second and third design plans used some newer planning principles, such as placing parking away from the street, instead of in front of buildings, as in typical commercial zonings. By putting stores closer to the road and the parking behind, it allows for more community feel, Colonna said.

"By just having the right placement, you start having the right [feel] we're looking for, really starting to bring a new community feel to it," he said.

Colonna said he wasn't sure when the plan would move from the planning stages to implementation, but that the goal was by September.

The city will take public comment on the plan before implementation. Colonna said the city has received

about 1,500 comments thus far, and the plan is to keep residents involved throughout the process.

"The next workshops are going to be on the policy side," Colonna said. "I want to keep it interactive. What I don't want to do is go into a vacuum for four months and say, 'This is it.'"

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