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## **Developer plans to adapt Bell Labs bldg.**

### **Somerset Development plans for mixed uses on Holmdel site**

BY ERIN O. STATTEL

The Lakewood developer in line to purchase the former Bell Labs site in Holmdel Township has plans for a mix of uses including retail, housing and a hotel, and will preserve the iconic building on the site.

"We feel that the building and site are conducive to a mix of uses and plan on keeping a significant portion of the building for office space," Somerset Development President Ralph Zucker said in an e-mail last week.

Somerset Development has made an offer to purchase the Lucent property on Crawfords Corner Road and has signed a contract with the technology giant, according to Alcatel-Lucent spokeswoman Mary Ward.

"We have signed a contract and are waiting on due diligence and issues like that," Ward said Aug. 6. "There has been interest expressed [by other buyers] in the property, but we have signed a contract and are not discussing that at this time."

Zucker said Somerset will attempt to keep much of the Eero Saarinen-designed building as office space, but market conditions may limit that use.

"The current market does not lend itself to fully populate the building with office space," he said, "but we intend to aggressively market the office component at discounted pricing to jump-start leasing activity and create the cash flow necessary to stabilize the building."

"At the same time, we feel it is necessary to incorporate other uses as well, including hotel, a conference center, restaurants, shopping and other supportive retail and some residential."

Zucker, a principal in Lakewood-based Somerset Development with Rubin Schron, said the iconic building was one of the draws of the property.

"We want to be sensitive to the impact of all uses on the community and engage their input in order to solidify our design for the site," he said.

The previous potential buyer was Preferred Real Estate Investments, of Conshohocken, Pa. That deal fell through last November amid concerns that Preferred would demolish the building and add hundreds of housing units to the site

The large campus that was once populated by approximately 6,000 employees is now empty except for a few maintenance and security personnel, and the iconic building is considered to be the capstone of the property.

"We are approaching this with a preservationist attitude, and one of the things that attracted us to the site was this incredible building, which we intend to preserve," Zucker said. "The design charrette that was held in April was a major factor in our interest in this site, and we feel confident that we are in a position to follow a number of the ideas generated by the charrette."

Zucker added that the developer would be open to feedback from the township and residents.

"Moving forward, one of the things we need to do is work with the town to find the best mix of uses for the building that allows us to preserve the structure," he added. "We find Saarinen's design for the building to be extremely fluid and desirable for a mix of uses, and we look forward to working with the Holmdel community to determine what the best uses are for the building."

As for the recent report from the Citizens Advisory Committee for the Lucent Property and the design charrette held in April by professional engineers and architects, the development company said it values community involvement in the development process.

"One of the reasons we decided to move forward with this site is that we were extremely encouraged by the results of the April charrette," Zucker said. "There seems to be a consensus among the results of the charrette and the Holmdel Township Lucent Advisory Committee report that leans toward a mix of uses for the site, which is something we also support."

Ward declined to disclose the purchase price of the property.

According to the report by the Citizens Advisory Committee for the Lucent Property, the 2008 assessment of the property was \$56,227,300. The report broke that number down with the buildings assessed at \$10,630,200, a total of 383 acres that are non-farmland assessed at \$45,521,500, and 90 acres that are farmland assessed at \$75,600.

"The rate of assessment to market value is 100 percent this year," said Eileen Marchette of the Holmdel Township Tax Assessor's Office.

According to the township, the property is currently zoned OL-1, meaning it is zoned for office/laboratory uses.

"I would hope that they [Somerset Development] will come to the town and will listen to what the residents have to say and work in a cooperative manner to find the best fit for all of us," said Holmdel Mayor Serena DiMaso.

The Citizens Advisory Committee for the Lucent Property reported that its chief suggestion was for the town to hire a planner for the former Bell Labs site.

Ralph Blumenthal, co-chair of the advisory committee, said he had spoken with principals of Somerset Development who were in attendance at the previous township committee meeting.

"I am aware of the potential issues of the agreement," Blumenthal said. "Some of what they say I find interesting and positive, others draw some concern."

Blumenthal said he is not aware of any specific plans for the site or the building designed by Finnish American architect Saarinen.

"There is a lot that is unclear yet, but some of what they had described would require zoning changes, and I would reiterate the advisory committee's recommendation of not just having a planner, but organizing a planning project that looks from the residents' perspective," Blumenthal said. "Clearly the developer will look out for their best interests; some of that will be great for Holmdel, and some of it won't."

Blumenthal said he still believes the township should have someone "negotiating on behalf of the town and the residents when developers come to the town with a property purchase."

"We need someone to look at various options from the township's perspective," he said. "The zoning should only be changed if it is beneficial to the town."

DiMaso said she read the advisory committee's report, but that its feasibility is questionable.

"The report suggested that we hire a professional planner," DiMaso said. "A, we don't have money for that, and B, it's still a private sale. I don't know if a resident would want us planning their property, let alone a large development company."

DiMaso said that the Township Committee will still use the report findings.

"In light of the sale, the governing body will use the report more as a tool as opposed to a full-blown presentation," she said.

Blumenthal added that a presentation of the report has not been scheduled for Sept. 4 as reported, but that the advisory committee is still open to the possibility of a presentation.

According to Zucker, Somerset Development has had large-scale projects in other New Jersey towns.

"In Aberdeen, we were named the redeveloper of the 50-acre former Anchor Glass factory site, and we also developed Somerset Village at Crystal Lakes in Egg Harbor Township," Zucker said. "One of the highlights of our New Jersey portfolio is Westmont Station in Wood-Ridge in Bergen County."

According to Zucker, Westmont Station is a 70-acre transit-oriented, pedestrianfriendly redevelopment for which work has already started. The new community is slated to include a mix of residential, retail, civic spaces, office space, and recreational uses, all anchored by a brand-new NJ Transit train station that will connect with the Bergen Line commuter rail to Manhattan.



The atrium of the Bell Labs building