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Developer, twp. open dialogue on Lucent site *Zucker: Somerset is not a high-density developer*

BY ERIN O. STATTEL Staff Writer HOLMDEL — Somerset Development, contract purchaser of the former Bell Labs property, held a town hall-style meeting Sept. 24 to share ideas with and receive feedback from the community regarding the redevelopment of the site on Crawford's Corner Road.



FRANK GALIPO Representatives of Somerset Development and architects from Rotwein and Blake, Livingston discuss reuse of the Alcatel-Lucent property at a Sept. 24 forum in Holmdel.

"I will say that we had a very good dialogue," said Somerset Development President Ralph Zucker last week. "It was the first time we met the community in any capacity. We felt that for an open conversation, it was a good starting point."

Zucker said that while his Lakewood-based company and the Holmdel community had not reached a consensus, he felt that he met people who "are willing to engage in an honest conversation."

Mayor Serena DiMaso also called the forum "a good introduction."

"I think it was a good introduction for the people of Holmdel to meet the developer," she said. "I would hope the developer will hold another meeting in the near future with plans for the property. I know I am interested

in hearing their proposal, and I am looking

forward to working with Mr. Zucker for the best interests of Holmdel."

"We probably won't agree on everything," Zucker said, "but hopefully we can work well together."

There has been some concern that the developer is involved with high-density projects, but Zucker refuted that assertion.

"I wouldn't call us a high-density builder," Zucker said in a Sept. 26 interview. "We tend to focus, at least recently, on mixed-use environments. The properties we get involved with lend themselves to smart growth solutions.

"I think in this case, anybody that was there [at the forum] will attest that we are moving toward use that will leave the site intact and preserved so the community will not face high-density all over the tract."

The former Bell Labs building is situated on 472 acres with Middletown, Crawfords Corner and Roberts roads bordering the site.

Zucker said his company wanted to achieve several things by holding the forum in the Lucent building atrium area.

"We wanted to give the community some insight into our view from our side and let them see the challenges we face so we all understand the real issues," Zucker said. "We presented concepts, but we still have no plan yet, and we wanted to talk about the mixed-use concept and the reasons why we feel it is the best option.

"We also wanted to continue the dialogue that Michael Calafati [of Historic Buildings Architects] and DOCOMOMO and Preservation N.J. began. And of course, we wanted to hear the concerns and issues from the community."

Zucker called the conversation "enlightening and logical," and said the development company better understands the concerns of the community.

"The next step is to develop a comprehensive approach," Zucker said. "Of course a single use would be great, but barring a miracle, we have to be pragmatic. We left the room feeling better than [when] we went in."

Residents in attendance at the Sept. 24 forum said the meeting was informative.

"I very much appreciate the effort the contract developer and his company had gone to to envision a reuse for the [former] Bell Labs building that would be long term and ensure a stable tax situation for the town, and working with the community to create some sort of consensus for the use," said resident Jim McCorkel during an interview Sept. 26. "I think

he [Zucker] has a lot of guts to take this on, given the current economic situation."

Other residents said they were not satisfied.

"I was not impressed," said resident Bill Hennigan in a Sept. 29 interview. "But from a business standpoint, he is doing the right thing and not getting thrown off the stage. I think more work needs to go in if all parties are to be satisfied."

Hennigan said he felt that since there were no plans to present at the forum, the audience remained mostly quiet.

"In the past, the audience was boisterous when Preferred presented plans for housing on that property," Hennigan said. "Zucker had no plans, and I think this meeting was just to test the waters and see what are hot-button issues with this community."

As part of the developer's vision, Zucker said Somerset's solution for re-use of the site includes using the existing Eero Saarinen designed building.

"Our solution involved trying to contain the redevelopment to the building and to maximize its immediate surroundings, but we made no commitments even though that was the thrust of the conversation," he said. "I don't think there is anybody who wants to see that property cut up into 1-acre lots, and that is high-density."

Zucker, who is a principal in Somerset along with Rubin Schron, said high density is a tactic used "to instill fear into people's hearts."

"I really think it is a misnomer when it applies to us," he said. "As a company, we really don't engage in high-density practices."

He said his company does not approach projects with the same plan each time.

"We're not a cookie-cutter development company," he said. "We are attracted to this site because of the building and grounds. We don't use one playbook and shove it into every job."

Finnish-American architect Saarinen designed the main building at the former Bell Labs site. World-renowned landscape architect Sasaki, Walker and Associates designed the landscaping surrounding the 2 million-square-foot mid-century modern building. The building was erected between 1959 and 1962 and was expanded in 1966 and 1985.

According to Preservation New Jersey, the site in Holmdel is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

As home to Bell Labs for nearly half a century, the site was the locale of several technological advances, including the cell phone and the work of six Nobel Prize laureates.

Shuttered in July 2007 and listed for sale, the site is owned by Alcatel-Lucent, the parent company of Bell Labs.

According to Preservation New Jersey, in 2006 the owners entered into an agreement with Preferred Real Estate Investments of Conshohocken, Pa. Preferred proposed demolishing Saarinen's building, but later recanted when hundreds of letters of protest came from scientists worldwide.

While the property is zoned for lowdensity coverage in order to preserve a major groundwater recharge area, Preferred had also proposed constructing 300 new homes on both sides of the long access road, in exchange for saving the main structure for a new corporate office park.

Alcatel-Lucent informed the Township Committee that the deal fell through in November 2007.

Since then, interest has remained high in preserving the site, and a design charrette was held April 11-13 in an attempt to discover ways to preserve the iconic building.

According to Zucker, Somerset Development also developed Somerset Village at Crystal Lakes in Egg Harbor Township, Wesmont Station in Wood-Ridge, Bergen County, which is a 70-acre transit-oriented, pedestrian-friendly redevelopment and was named as the redeveloper for the former Anchor Glass factory property in Aberdeen.

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