

Renaissance seeking regulatory change

By KAITLYN NAPLES
STAFF WRITE

Even though Bare Bones has vacated its space on Main Street, the downtown plans are still progressing and Bristol Rising is still working its way towards a better city center.

Renaissance Downtowns, the developer for the Depot Square site, is currently in the process of getting zoning regulations approved so it can continue on to its phases of development. The developer presented nine recommendations to the city's Zoning Commission and Planning Commission recently, all of which have been through a public hearing, with the exception of one, just for language explanation. The developer is expected to go back to the city's Zoning Commission for another public hearing on the sixth amendment, which would allow for some buildings to change structure on the second floor, so it isn't exactly the same as the first.

Another amendment would allow for ground housing in mix-use buildings, on non-key streets. Project Manager Ryan Porter said streets like Center Street, Federal Street and others that surround the downtown, would be able to allow ground level housing. "Retail wouldn't survive back there," Porter said. Other recommendations include changes in parking structures downtown, to allow more spots, which include angled parking.

Once the zoning public hearing completes, Renaissance then will apply for special permits. Porter said the timing will work out well because the developer should get the special permits it needs while McDonald's is being relocated.

Discount Food Outlet was given its 90-day notice at the beginning of the year, to vacate its property so McDonald's can start building its new facility. DFO has until about mid-March to vacate the space, Porter said. At a recent council meeting, Porter had announced that the developer has been talking to other grocers about possibly opening up downtown.

During the time between DFO closing and a new grocer opening, Porter said the current owner of the former Tinty's building is considering opening up a grocery store, and Mayor Art Ward Athletes in the district may eventually be able to play games outside at Bristol Eastern High School. The Operations Committee, of the Board of Education, recently approved a motion to move forward with fundraising to put permanent lights on the field at Bristol Eastern High School.

What was once a project that called for raising money to construct two artificial turf fields, one at each high school, has now been scaled-back. The money that will be used for the lights will be completely fundraised, unless state grants become available. No Board of Education money will be used for this project. “A lot of work and research was done,” on the original project, Superintendent of Schools Philip Streifer said, however, in the end, the fund raising “was problematic,” he said. “This is a lot more doable.”

The original project was calling for \$4 million, which would have been for two artificial turf fields, at both Bristol Eastern and Bristol Central high schools. Streifer said the down-sizing of the project wasn't because of Bristol Central's lack of motivation, but because realistically, Bristol Eastern is further along in the development process. Currently, Bristol Eastern has the field, handicapped accessible bleachers, a concession stand, bathrooms and other amenities that Bristol Central is lacking.

The Operations Committee did not completely write the original project off, but just considered the lights at Bristol Eastern would be a “phase one” in the process, which is expected to cost about \$200,000. “There is still an inter said the city is looking to work with the Bristol Community Organization on a shuttle service to grocers on Route 6.

Porter said there are five phases in the downtown development process, which he said could be an eight to 10-year build-out. He said the plan is to begin phase one by the end of this year. He is starting to work on financing for the project, which he said could take a few months, but added that “things are moving in a great direction,” especially with businesses saying they would be willing to relocate to the new downtown.

Porter added he is also working with a property owner on Summer Street, who is expected to be demolishing and rebuilding new housing. In the beginning of March, Renaissance is bringing in a retail expert to hold a workshop for businesses and sponsors, “to see how we can go out and attract more business,” for the downtown. The workshop is expected to be held on March 6, and the location is still in the works of being finalized.

Bristol Rising is still working on its housing survey, and making sure the residents of the city have a say in what they would like to see in their future downtown. Bristol Rising has a survey site loaded with options, brought up by the current city residents, being voted on or “liked” so those ideas can move forward in the development process.

Right now, Bristol Rising is focusing on what kind of housing city residents would like to see downtown, with its Housing 400 Campaign. The choices range from micro-lofts, which are often used in more urban developments, studios or lofts, and one, two or three bedroom apartments, or townhouses. Everyone gets only one vote on the survey site and for the housing ideas to get feasibility studies and for the developer to decide on which units would best fit the downtown, they must get 400 “likes” or votes, by March 30. To vote for housing online, visit the Bristol Rising site at www.bristolrising.com. After individuals become members on the site, visit the survey site at www.gobristolsurvey.com and become a member, then vote.

