

Developers see river and rail as major draws

RIVER LINE From A1

In Palmyra, another Pennsylvania developer is negotiating the terms of a plan with the borough to turn a 185-acre brownfield near the River Line's Pennsauken/Route 73 station into a new development with 600 to 800 age-restricted housing units, big-box retailers and recreational activities.

In Cinnaminson, a large office park is under construction across the street from the future site of more than 900 homes.

In Beverly, the New Jersey American Water Co. has proposed to "bring the waterfront back to the public" with the construction of town houses, restaurants and stores.

Tony Nelessen, an urban designer with A. Nelessen Associates, a consulting firm based in Belle Mead, said that in its first year of operation, the River Line has become an "economic engine for growth" in the communities it passes through.

A Nelessen study commissioned by NJ Transit projected that 19,000 new residential units and nearly 11 million square feet of new commercial, industrial and office space would be built in River Line towns in the next five to 10 years.

James Stewart, president of J.P. Stewart Development in Medford, said the River Line has turned many of the long-struggling riverfront towns into "new transit communities" and created a link between these towns and Philadelphia and New York City.

Stewart has proposed the construction of a \$45 million residential and commercial complex on the site of the crumbling McNeal Mansion in Burlington City. He said the River Line was a major reason he decided to pitch the project.

"We see the River Line as being just as important to our project as the Delaware River," Stewart said.

The developers' interest in the riverfront towns may also reflect a trend of movement into areas that were once ignored. Smart-growth planning initiatives administered by the state Department of Community Affairs are pushing builders toward redevelopment in urban areas and away from the so-called "greenfields," the semirural properties undeveloped except for agricultural use.

For decades, developers looked to the open farmland in Burlington County to build large residential and commercial projects. Today, state, county and municipal officials are trying to slow the sprawl, preserve farmland and open space, and redirect development to urban areas.

Mark Remsa, director of the Burlington County Department of Economic Development and Regional Planning, said that with the current restrictions on greenfield development, the trend in the county is for developers to move toward redevelopment projects.

"The market has changed, and the (building) industry is following it," Remsa said.

Steve Durst, director of site acquisition for Goodman Properties of Jenkintown, Pa., agreed with Remsa's assessment.

"To take pristine land out of its natural state is unpopular now," Durst said. "Reconditioning is a good use of the land."

Goodman Properties was select-



Plans call for the long-vacant McNeal Mansion in Burlington City to be totally renovated as part of a \$45 million project near the city's riverfront. BCT staff photo/DENNIS McDONALD

ed last month by the Palmyra Borough Council to transform a 185-acre brownfield in Palmyra near the River Line. The site was once home to a landfill, a drive-in movie theater and several industrial plants. Goodman's mission is to turn it into a viable area for housing, retail and recreational uses.

"The original cities along the river were located there for a reason," Durst said. "They're in good locations with infrastructure in place."

He said the River Line will only encourage more redevelopment in the area.

"(The River Line) is an extra incentive," Durst said. "It's already having a major impact. I think in 10 to 20 years, you're going to see some major redevelopment in these older towns."

Jason Kaplan, president of Kaplan Cos. of Highland Park in Middlesex County, said his company decided about three years ago to focus more on redevelopment projects around the state, although the firm still pursues greenfield developments where possible.

"I think it's time to take a harder look and redevelop in areas like Riverside, where the infrastructure is already in place," said Kaplan, whose company owns and plans to redevelop the Keystone Watch Case building in Riverside. "It's the nature of where development in the state is going now."

The following is a sampling of some of the major projects proposed or under way in towns along the River Line:

■ **Beverly:** The New Jersey American Water Co. has proposed the construction of shops and condominiums on land it owns along the waterfront. While the company said it would not release a final design until July 4, artist renderings for the proposed Beverly Landing show town houses surrounded by a park, multistory buildings with stores and galleries, and an amphitheater and lighthouse jutting into the river. The project would cover a half-mile of waterfront from Manor Road to Cooper Street and from the river to Second Street.

Hoboken-based developer Frank Rein is planning to convert the former St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church convent into apartments for senior citizens.

In addition, city officials have met with a few developers interested in redeveloping part of Railroad Avenue near the light-rail stop. There is one active business and an empty acre of land at the avenue's intersection with Broad Street. The vacant lot had been the home of the Beverly Underwear Factory, which was torn down last year.

■ **Burlington City:** J.P. Stewart Development has a \$45 million plan for residential and commercial

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development at the site of the long-vacant McNeal Mansion on Pearl Street. The proposal includes 171 town houses and condominiums, a marina, a restaurant and more than 70,000 square feet of office and retail space on the 20-acre property on the Delaware River. Twenty of the condominiums would be in the restored mansion.

Part of the plan calls for two connected three-story buildings next to the River Line tracks, with office space on the top two floors and retail space on the ground floors. Included in the project would be a new rail station, the third stop in the city. City officials are creating a redevelopment zone for the McNeal property.

The Philadelphia-based Westrum Development Co. wants to build 97 town houses along Tatham

Street and 45 town houses and condominiums along the riverfront at the site of an old waterworks plant.

The Stewart and Westrum projects have received preliminary approval from the City Council.

Officials with D'Anastasio Corp., based in Pennsauken, want to build 41 town houses on the six-acre site of the former Gregory's department store at Washington Avenue and Juniper Street.

Five new businesses have opened in the city since the River Line began running, and two other businesses are expected to open, according to Donna Boone, executive director of the city's Main Street New Jersey program.

The city Planning Board is also considering proposals for a catering facility and banquet hall and a furniture center and distribution center in the city-owned Commerce Square.

■ **Cinnaminson:** Developer 1714 Bannard Street LLC is constructing a 105,000-square-foot business park with office, warehouse, storage and restaurant space on Bannard Street next to the River Line station, where Centron Coatings and a former pallet warehouse once stood.

The business park is across the street from the Villages at Cinnaminson Harbour, a 911-unit residential development being built by Kaplan Cos. Jason Kaplan, the company's president, said the project was conceived before his firm realized the impact of the River Line. Once the impact was seen, he said, the firm's designers went back and realigned the entrance of the development to provide better access to the light-rail line.

■ **Delanco:** J.S. Hovnanian & Sons has proposed a development of 92 town houses along Coopertown Road near the River Line and the Rancocas Creek. The developer is expected to take the plan to the township's Joint Land Use Board within the next month, township officials said.

In addition, a major moving and storage company is in preliminary negotiations with the township to move to another site off Coopertown

Road. Due to ongoing negotiations, township officials declined to name the company involved.

■ **Edgewater Park:** Mayor Richard Tucker said township officials are looking to revamp the township's master plan to allow more businesses to build along the rail line and Route 130.

Tucker said officials are considering a plan to turn the area near the River Line's Beverly/Edgewater Park stop into a "transit village" with new sidewalks, street lights, businesses and homes. The "transit village" designation would make the township eligible for special grants from the state Department of Transportation for many of the improvements.

■ **Florence:** Township officials are in negotiations with Conshohocken, Pa.-based Preferred Properties, which would build a massive office park on the site of the former John A. Roebling's Sons Co. steel mill. Detailed plans of the project have not yet been made public, but the development would likely take up a large portion of the 234-acre property, which has been on the federal Superfund list of contaminated sites since 1983.

Last year, the second phase of construction of Whitesell Construction Co.'s Haines Industrial Center began. The Delran-based construction firm plans to erect 20 warehouses totaling 6 million square feet of space at the 700-acre center near the Burlington Township border.

■ **Palmyra:** Borough officials recently selected Goodman Properties to redevelop an 185-acre brownfield near the Route 73/Pennsauken station into a site for residential, commercial and recreational uses.

Goodman's proposal calls for about 350,000 square feet of retail space with several big-box retailers and a supermarket on one section of the property. It also calls for 600 to 800 age-restricted living units.

Borough officials have expressed some concerns about the number of housing units, an issue being addressed as the town and developer hammer out a final design agreement.

Goodman's plan includes leisure and recreational uses, such as an antique carousel, a miniature-golf course, paddle boats and a narrow-gauge railroad, along with an Amish farm and market and a 10-acre petting zoo.

■ **Riverside:** The Township Committee recently selected the team of Keating Partners of Philadelphia and Pulte Homes of Trevoise, Pa., to redevelop the majority of a brownfield known as the Golden Triangle, which is bordered by Pavilion Avenue, the Rancocas Creek and the River Line's tracks.

The partnership proposed the construction of hundreds of residential units and 24,000 square feet of retail space. The dwellings would include 66 town houses facing the creek and 200 condominiums in the middle of the property.

Kaplan Cos. owns the centerpiece of the Golden Triangle, the Keystone Watch Case building constructed in 1908, and an adjacent property. Kaplan is proposing to build about 200 town houses and 60 condominiums. The first floor of the seven-story Watch Case building would have some commercial office space.

The developers and township officials are working out details of the agreements.

Redevelopment zones can be vital to change

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Whether it's for a single property or an entire downtown section, a number of municipalities along NJ Transit's River Line are looking at the creation of redevelopment zones as an important tool for bringing in new tax ratables.

Mark Remsa, director of the Burlington County Department of Economic Development and Regional Planning, said redevelopment zones are being used as a way to transform sections of towns that are in need of revival.

"Generally, the goal of redevelopment zones is to revitalize (towns)," Remsa said. "It can be a host of things. Oftentimes, (property owners) can get low-interest money to rehab their properties and often get five-year tax abatements."

Under the state Redevelopment and Housing Law, a municipality can create a redevelopment zone that covers one property or an entire section of the town as long as the area in question meets a list of criteria set by the state. Among other conditions, the area must be abandoned, decayed, undeveloped or underdeveloped.

After going through the state-mandated process required to create a redevelopment zone, a town emerges with the power to actively pursue the necessary steps to redevelop the designated area into productive ratables.

As part of that power, the law allows a town to reconfigure parcels, clear land, install infrastructure and make other site improvements, whether the municipality owns the property or not.

In addition to helping property owners acquire low-interest loans for rehabbing homes, civic buildings and other structures in the zone, the law allows the town to negotiate tax abatements and other financial incentives to encourage revitalization and redevelopment.

"It's just a way of giving the

owners of the properties and potential developers incentives to do more than what they can do now," said John Marshall, the township zoning officer in Cinnaminson.

The law also permits the town to seek proposals from developers for areas in the zone, even if they are privately owned, and then to enter into partnerships with those developers. And, if necessary to the redevelopment project, the law allows the town to use the power of eminent domain to acquire properties in the zones.

Remsa said the creation of a redevelopment zone is usually an enticement to developers because it allows them to streamline the approval process for their projects.

The developers generally provide an overall concept for the zone in response to a municipality's request for proposals. Once the municipal government selects a developer, officials and the developer sit down and work out a general agreement for the project before the application process even begins.

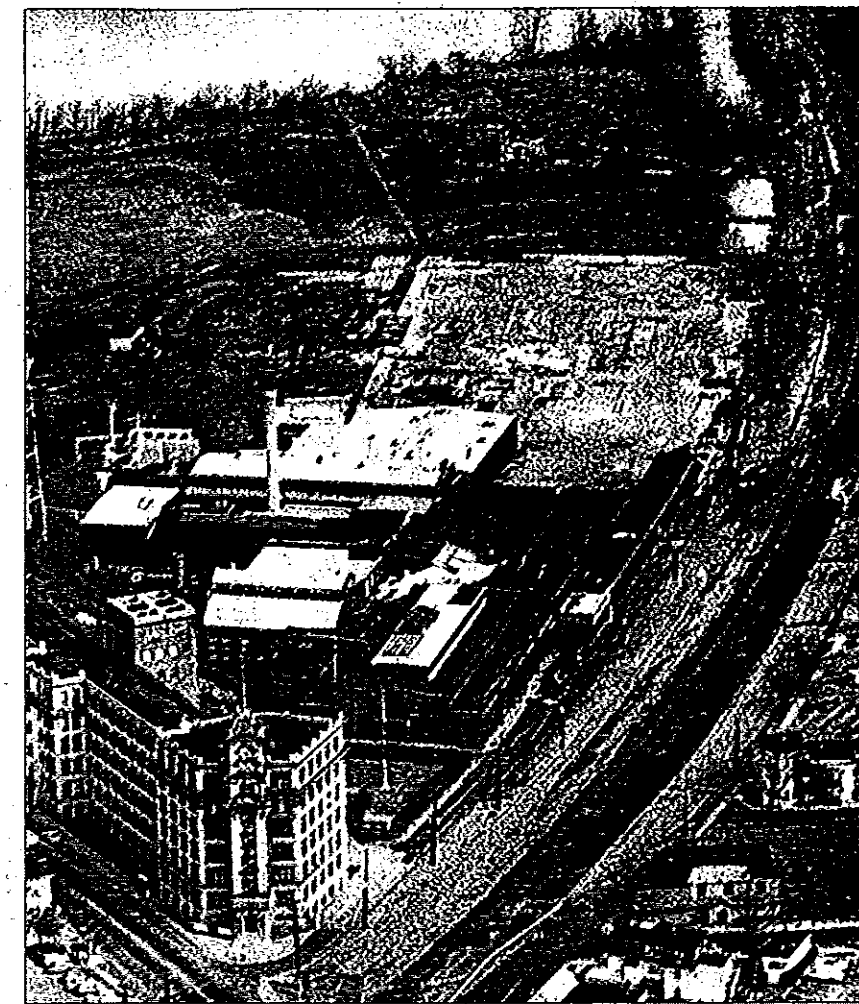
"It's like a partnership with the municipality," Remsa said. "... That way, there's no surprises for developers."

However, in some county towns, it is the power of eminent domain — the taking of property through condemnation — that has led to contention between municipal officials and residents.

More than 200 Delanco residents turned out for a township meeting last November to loudly voice their opposition to having their properties included in a redevelopment investigation being conducted by the township Planning Board for an area along Burlington Avenue.

The investigation of a property or properties undertaken by the board at the request of the municipal government is the first step in the process of creating a redevelopment zone.

The residents lashed out at officials, saying they feared the creation of a redevelopment zone would result in the township con-



BCT staff photo/DENNIS McDONALD
An aerial photo shows Riverside Golden Triangle, anchored by the Keystone Watch Case building at the apex and bordered by the Rancocas Creek in the background. The entire triangle will be redeveloped.

demning their homes or businesses.

Although township officials argued it was not their intent to seize any property and that the creation of a zone would help provide owners with the means to upgrade their properties, the residents remained adamant in their opposition.

Late that night, after hours of public comment, township officials voted to scrap the redevelopment plan.

That same month, dozens of residents in Riverside who shared the same fear of losing their properties attended a public information meeting to learn more about the township's redevelopment plans for the so-called Golden Triangle section and two adjacent areas.

Planners there were able to convince the crowd that the project's main focus was the Golden Triangle, an area bordered by the Rancocas Creek, Pavilion Avenue

and the railroad track used by the River Line.

Planners told the crowd that the surrounding areas were included so property owners could take advantage of the tax and financial incentives to spruce up their homes and businesses.

A developer doesn't want to commit to spending millions on one side of the street without knowing the other side of the street will be redeveloped, said Christopher Warren, a consulting planner for Riverside, referring to areas along Pavilion Avenue and Lafayette Street, which are adjacent to the triangle.

Remsa, who spoke at that Riverside meeting, said the whole tone of the residents in attendance changed from anger to relief after the redevelopment plan was fully explained.

"Redevelopment zones revitalize, rid the township of eyesores and bring in needed tax ratables," Marshall said.

How a town creates a redevelopment zone

The state's Local Redevelopment and Housing Law requires these steps in the creation of a redevelopment zone:

- The municipality's governing body must direct the planning board to undertake an investigation of the specific area under consideration to determine whether it meets the criteria for redevelopment area designation.

- The planning board must prepare and post a map with the municipal clerk showing the boundaries of the area and the location of the various parcels to be considered. A statement establishing the basis for the investigation must accompany the map.

- The planning board must conduct the investigation and hold a public hearing in order to discuss the findings and to allow for public participation by those interested in or those who would be affected by the proposed action. The planning board must submit a resolution to the governing body encompassing the results of its findings.

- Upon receipt of the recommendations from the planning board, the governing body may act to adopt a resolution designating the area in question, or a specific section of that area, as a section in need of redevelopment.

- A copy of the adopted resolution must be transmitted to the commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs. The commissioner has 30 days to determine whether the designated area is located where state policy encourages development or redevelopment.

- When a municipality receives redevelopment area designation and approval from the commissioner, the municipality is required to prepare a redevelopment plan for the area. A redevelopment plan establishes the goals and objectives of the municipality in designating the area in need of redevelopment and outlines the actions to be taken to accomplish these goals and objectives.

- Once prepared, the redevelopment plan is reviewed by the planning board. After a public hearing, the plan is referred back to the governing body in the form of a planning board resolution, with the board's recommendations regarding adoption.

- The governing body may act to adopt the redevelopment plan by ordinance. The adopted redevelopment plan may become an explicit amendment to the municipality's zoning district map and zoning ordinance or may be treated as an overlay to existing zoning.

Source: New Jersey Conference of Mayors