*City of Greenbelt, Maryland*

***GREENBELT CITYLINK***

 WORK SESSION OF THE GREENBELT CITY COUNCIL held Wednesday, December 13, 2006, for the purpose of meeting with the new owners of Greenway Village Apartments to discuss their plans for redeveloping the property.

Mayor Davis called the meeting to order at 8:00 p.m. It was held in the Senior Classroom of the Community Center.

PRESENT WERE: Councilmembers Konrad E. Herling, Leta M. Mach, Edward V. J. Putens, Rodney M. Roberts, and Mayor Judith F. Davis.

STAFF PRESENT WERE: Michael McLaughlin, City Manager; Celia Craze and Tarek Bolden, Planning and Community Development; and Kathleen Gallagher, City Clerk.

ALSO PRESENT WERE: Lacy Rice, Partner, Sam Glass, Associate, and Doug Rigler, Development Director, Federal Capital Partners; Larry Taub, O’Malley, Miles Nylen & Gilmore; Scott Knudson, Wiencek & Associates Architects & Planners; Ken Dunn, Loiederman Soltesz Associates; Michelle Fox, Property Manager for Greenway Village Apartments; Sheldon Goldberg, Advisory Planning Board and Greenbelt East Advisory Committee; and Bill Orleans.

Following introductions, Mr. McLaughlin introduced Mr. Taub as the attorney for the project and said that Federal Capital Partners had been discussing their redevelopment plans for Greenway Village Apartments with Planning Department staff. He said tonight’s meeting was scheduled to discuss aspects of the project for which City support would be helpful.

Mr. Taub said Federal Capital Partners had purchased the property last summer and was pursuing two phases to the project: renovation of the existing apartments and construction of a new senior housing component. He said they plan to apply for federal tax credits for the senior building in order to make it affordable housing. He said there is no problem or impediment with regard to the renovation of the existing apartments, and they are moving forward with that. The new senior housing, however, is another matter.

Greenway Village is zoned R-18, which includes multifamily, mid-rise buildings. Mr. Taub explained that, for reasons that are not entirely clear, dedicated senior housing in an R-18 zone requires a special exception. He said this makes little sense in practice because seniors have less impact on the existing community than other populations. He said not only does it make no sense, but it also imposes an onerous process that would take at least a year-and-a-half and involve a fairly high cost. As a result, they are seeking the City’s support on a request for a text amendment. He said, “There really is no other way we can do this.” He said they understand that historically Greenbelt has opposed text amendments but that one reason text amendments have developed such a bad reputation is that they are so often site-specific. He said he believes text amendments should be broader in their applicability, with the result that he has drafted a bill that would make this change throughout the R-18 zone, not just at this location. He added the caveat, however, that he has tried this before and that the County Council has insisted that the change be more specific. He said that if the text amendment is adopted, they will be required to go through a Detailed Site Plan (DSP) process that in his opinion is just as rigorous as the special exception process. In response to a question from Ms. Mach, it was clarified that although a site plan is required for a special exception, a project taking that route would not go through the DSP process.

Later in the meeting, Ms. Craze returned to this point and explained further that the purpose of this text amendment would not be, as was often the case, to allow a use in a zone that is not otherwise allowed. She said senior housing is already allowed in the R-18 zone as long as it meets the criteria for a special exception. She said the only difference is in the process that would be followed. She and Mr. Taub agreed that the City would actually have more input and control over the DSP process because while the City is accustomed to working closely with the County Planning Board and planning staff who review the DSP, a special exception would go to a Zoning Hearing Examiner for legal review and decision. Ms. Craze said she could see no benefit to the City in having a review handled by a Zoning Hearing Examiner.

Mayor Davis asked if they had any sponsors for the text amendment on the County Council. Mr. Taub said they were intentionally coming to the City first. He said he would do that under any circumstances, but that since their County Councilmember, Ingrid Turner, is new, he particularly would prefer to approach her with City support.

A major discussion was started by several questions from Mr. Putens, who said he was concerned about having so many garden apartment rental units in the City. He asked if they had considered any forms of ownership. Mr. Rice said the situation now is that the market is down for all forms of ownership and that rental is “soaring.” Mr. Roberts said he wanted them to be more open to different types of ownership possibilities. He suggested that the market is not down locally for cooperatives and said that if they wanted to get support for a text amendment from the City, the City should get something out of it. Mr. Putens asked if they had thought “outside the box” and considered taking the site and building on it more creatively. Mr. Rice described in some detail the phases they had passed through in their thinking, beginning with razing the buildings and constructing new townhouses. He said they had already spent a great deal of time thinking about this and discussing it but that in the current market they could not afford to do a total rebuild.

Mr. Knudson presented the illustrations of the concept for the project, including the apartment renovations and a four-story, 75-unit building for the senior housing. This building would replace the existing club house and pool, and a new club house would be built further back. If the senior housing does not go forward, the old clubhouse would be renovated. Mayor Davis encouraged them to talk with Green Ridge House, which, while different in many respects, has been a very successful senior project in Greenbelt with a steady waiting list.

Mayor Davis asked if they expected the rent to go up significantly with the renovation. Mr. Rice said only about $100 per month. There was discussion of whether these apartments might fill a need in the City for affordable, workforce apartments, especially if Greenbelt West is upscaled.

When it was mentioned that the senior apartments would have entirely separate management while sharing some common facilities, Mr. Roberts suggested the possibility of ownership rather than rental for the senior housing. Mr. Taub said their vision of its being “affordable” was dependent on the tax credits, which are available only to rental. There was some discussion of ways in which cooperatives might be kept affordable even if condominiums could not be. Ms. Mach suggested a couple of contact groups with experience in this area.

Mr. Putens reiterated that in his opinion garden-style rental apartments were not an asset for Greenbelt. Mr. Rice replied that the prior owners had a lot of trouble finding a buyer for the property at all. He said again that they had looked at other possibilities but that renovating the apartments was the only feasible thing for them to do. He said that building high-rise is not practical now because the costs cannot be recouped in rental or sale. He said they take a great deal of pride in their work in improving the properties they buy, and he encouraged Councilmembers to look at their work. He suggested a project in Landover Hills called Coopers Crossing. Mr. Dunn also noted that there are major water lines running at the Hanover Parkway side of the property, which seriously restrict the possibilities for use of some of the land.

Mr. Roberts said he disagreed with Mr. Putens, since he did not want more high-rise or density in the City. Mayor Davis also said she did not share Mr. Putens’ view, since she did not want more density or traffic in that location. She also commented that as a resident of a garden-style condo apartment, she has no objections to that style of building.

Mr. Rice said they view themselves as doing quality workforce housing. He said that there is a trade-off and that, for example, AIMCO is making a big investment and making a big bet that they will be able to attract tenants and buyers who can afford what they will have to charge..

Regarding the text amendment, the Mayor said she could probably support it if it would not be limited to this project. Mr. Taub stressed the importance of the City conveying that opinion to County Councilmember Turner and to the Planning Board. Mr. Rice pointed out that another issue is that the senior housing component is not a large project, but the cost of going through the special exception process would be as costly for this as for a much larger project. He said if they have to go the protracted route, they might determine that it is not worthwhile to do the senior housing.

Ms. Mach asked what the time frame was. Mr. Taub said the District Council would be back in session in January. He was given the dates of Council’s January regular meetings. Mayor Davis said she wanted them to look seriously at the possibility of cooperative senior housing, There was some discussion—and no consensus—on whether there was greater need in Greenbelt for market-value or subsidized senior housing.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen Gallagher
City Clerk