



For Immediate Release: 10.21.02

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Board Examining Options for Harlem-Ontario Property

With the goal of a November decision on the future of the publicly owned property at Harlem Avenue and Ontario Street, the Village Board is conducting a careful comparison of development alternatives currently under consideration for the site.

An unsolicited development proposal submitted in August by Chicago-based Whiteco LLC, prompted the Village to issue a call for alternatives for the site, now a surface parking lot with 100 spaces. Three additional responses were received, with two providing specific ideas for how best to use the land.

“The Village is in the enviable position of being able to pick and choose among concepts,” said Village President Joanne E. Trapani. “By comparing the three in terms of benefits to the community and return on our investment, we will be able to recommend a project that will be in the best long-term interest of the Village.”

Regional developer Bristol/Moran LLC, local interests Holley Court Commercial Partners and Hamilton Partners, a large, multi-faceted development company, responded to the Village’s call for alternatives to the Whiteco proposal to build a mixed used facility and public parking garage on the 56,000-plus square foot parcel.

Each of the proposals has its appeal, according to Trapani, but the level of public investment, potential tax benefits and possible physical impact on the neighborhood varies.

“Our job is to go past the conceptual and philosophical and analyze the details to determine what are the real costs and what are the true benefits to the community,” she said.

Trapani pointed out that should the Village Board choose to pursue a redevelopment plan for the site, the Board’s action would be just the beginning. Any project that requires variances from the Village’s base zoning code, as would all of the proposed concepts, must go through the Planned Development process, a comprehensive public review that can take several months.

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Among the factors the Board will consider when comparing the concepts will be height, density, impact on the surrounding neighborhood, tax benefits, return on any investment of public dollars and impact on the community's overall quality of life.

Once the Village Board has completed its analyses of the concepts, a redevelopment agreement will be negotiated with the developer whose project is deemed most desirable. The developer then must submit a formal Planned Development application to the Village, which is reviewed by the Village Board at public study session, allowing Board members to ask questions and offer comments. The Board then will refer the final application to the Plan Commission, a citizens' advisory body, for a comprehensive review, including public hearings and comments.

With its analysis complete, the Plan Commission will send the proposal back to the Village Board with a recommendation to approve, approve with modifications or deny. Finally, the Village Board acts on the proposal in a formal public meeting.

"The Harlem-Ontario site is ideal for a major mixed-use development," Trapani said. "It is close to public transportation, yet allows access to a major roadway without going through the neighborhood. The site also has some of the Village's taller buildings on its perimeter, which means a larger structure there will not be out of scale."

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(Editor's Note: A brief description of each concept is attached)

- Whiteco Residential, LLC: Approximately 220 rental apartments, a 600-car public parking garage, 65,000 square feet of commercial space, including a Trader Joe's specialty food market with 55 additional customer surface parking spaces, and an upscale, 50,000-square-foot Multiplex health club.
- Hamilton Partners: Expressed a non-specific interest in a mixed-use project of 110 apartments or condominiums (not specified), 60,000 square feet of retail space and a health club.
- Holley Court Commercial Partners: Park for 12 restaurants/night clubs, 30,000 square feet of office, retail and/or residential space, a 5,000-square foot upper level banquet hall, rose garden/park and 250-300 public parking spaces created by adding a level to Holley Court and creating an underground level.
- Bristol/Moran LLC: Approximately 220 apartments, 12,500 square feet of retail space (2,500 sq. ft. allocated to lobby), 30,000-40,000 square feet for a health club, speculated to be a Bally Total Fitness facility, and a 600-space public parking garage.

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