

Shop 'til you drop

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BY SUSAN DeMAR LAFFERTY The Star

New Lenox's first large-scale retail mall cleared the first hurdle by receiving conditional support Monday from the village plan commission.

The Cleveland-based Zaremba Group wants to develop more than one million square feet of retail on 175 acres at the southwest corner of Route 6 and Cedar Road. Dubbed Cedar Crossings, it would pump more than \$4 million in property and sales tax revenues into local coffers.

With only a quorum of members, the plan commission unanimously agreed to move the project forward despite suggestions from village staff that such action would be premature.

Village staff wants to see all road improvements in this area completed upfront to accommodate not only Cedar Crossings but future developments, including another mall on the northwest corner.

The village also is negotiating with Zaremba for a site for a new water storage tank.

The preliminary plan shows extensive road improvements to Route 6, a network of new roads to Cedar Road and to the south, with a connection from Clinton Road to Cedar Road. There's also direct access from Interstate 355 into the shopping center.

"This is a huge market. Right now, this business is going somewhere else," said Paul Vogel, who conducted a market study for Zaremba.

Zaremba was proposing to build the center and complete the road improvements in two stages. Initially, it would expand Route 6 to six lanes west of Cedar, and later, make improvements to Cedar Road and the Route 6 intersection.

The traffic plan has to be approved by the Illinois Department of Transportation, which may result in substantial changes to the plan, village officials said.

"We have all suffered through construction. It disrupts residents and has a negative impact on retailers," said Robin Ellis, the village's planning and development administrator. She is trying to coordinate improvements with all developers in this area.

"Cedar Road is going to need to be widened by the time this is built out. This is a major concern," plan commissioner Robert Lash said.

"Everyone (on the commission) is in favor of the project," acting chairman Mark Muehlnickel said. "We all see the economic benefits. There's nothing like it in the area. It has a lot of unique characteristics. But let's make sure all the I's are dotted and the T's crossed."

Charles Smith, the project's architect, pushed for preliminary approval, saying the issues cannot be resolved and users will not commit unless the village supports the plan.

"How can we verify that it's a viable project if there are traffic concerns?" Ellis asked.

The commission unanimously agreed to recommend approval of the preliminary plan contingent upon approval from IDOT and resolution of the water tank site. If substantial changes are made in the plan, it must come back to the plan commission for another public hearing.

Although the room was filled with residents, many left by 10 p.m., before the hearing was opened to the public.

Only one resident of the nearby Spring Creek neighborhood addressed the board.

"I want to be able to get out and go shopping. New Lenox has gridlock all over town," she said.

It is difficult now to get out of her subdivision onto Route 6 and over to Liberty Junior High School off Cedar Road, she said.

As proposed, the first stage of Cedar Crossings would include three big box stores, eight small to mid-size tenants and several smaller shops.

The center of the development would feature a landscaped circular drive, surrounded by smaller shops with similar architecture. The larger stores would surround that.

Village staff also wanted to see attractive architecture on the rear of the buildings that would face Route 6.

No specific plan was presented for the second phase, closer to the corner, commonly known as the Handorf property.

According to Greg Wells, who did a fiscal impact analysis for Zaremba, the completed project would generate \$2.7 million in net revenues for the village, \$986,000 for School District 122, \$522,000 for Lincoln-Way High School District 210 and a combined \$259,000 for the park, library and fire districts.

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