

City on the rebound?

Mount Vernon mayor promises that change is coming

By BRYAN F. YURCAN



As the agency charged with promoting development in Mount Vernon is under a federal probe, the mayor is hopeful that a final plan is in place by the end of July for a major redevelopment of the city's downtown.

"It's going to happen, we're quite serious," Mayor Ernie Davis said. "The development of the downtown area will change the whole of Mount Vernon."

The plan he refers to is near the Mount Vernon East Metro-North station, which would include a hotel and 300 condominium apartments.

Westchester County Legislator Clinton Young, who is challenging the incumbent three-term mayor in a primary, questions the timing and ability of the project to move ahead.

"The development over the railroad, in particular the hotel, is something (the mayor) has talked about over the past 13 years," Young said. "I honestly believe these are political promises only. Why would we think it's going to happen now?"

Davis said the city is currently in the process of interviewing developers for the project, which he said will be one of several major redevelopment projects for the city.

"(One of the developers) is going to build this, they have entered proposals and brought financial people with them and preliminary plans," he said. "We will pick the one that we think can do the job best."

The U.S. Attorney's Office recently served a subpoena demanding documents relating the financially-strapped Urban Renewal Agency, whose main function is to promote development in Mount Vernon.

"The Urban Renewal Agency is pretty much bankrupt, they couldn't pay (\$1.2 million in) health insurance premiums (to the state health insurance program for its employees)," Young said. "That shows mismanagement."

Previous plans for redevelopment of the area of the Metro-North station also included a sports and entertainment arena, but Davis said those plans have been scrapped.

In addition to the hotel and housing, Davis said the YMCA and library could be moved there as part of the plans.

"In the next month or two we should be pretty well along in the process," he said. "It's a little preliminary to say how long it will take" to complete the entire project.

Calls to a Metro-North spokesman regarding the development project were not returned as of press time.

Davis said there is "considerable interest" from planners and developers in not only the Metro-North project, but also the city as a whole.

He said developer Louis Cappelli, however, does not have any current designs on the city.

"There have been talks (with Cappelli), but frankly I think his plate is full and we have other equally well-known developers interested in the city and we are meeting with them," Davis said.

Joseph Apicella, senior vice president with Cappelli Enterprises, said the developer has no projects lined up in Mount Vernon at this time.

Among the other projects that Davis said have drawn interest include the redevelopment of Jesse Owens Memorial Stadium, which used to be the home of the state high school football championships.

"We have people interested in Memorial Stadium and we can probably achieve a lot there," he said. "It will be again a very active part of the city, it fell on hard times and we're trying to bring it back again."

Regarding the long-discussed plans for a hip-hop museum and cultural center in the city, Davis said that project "is going a little slower than I would like."

A city-owned building at 105 S. Fourth Ave. is the current designated site for the museum. The building has been stripped down, but construction on the museum has not begun yet.



Davis said the city is in the process of seeking grant money to fund the construction of the project.

Young has said that Mount Vernon has lagged behind other county cities such as Yonkers and New Rochelle in commercial and residential development as one reason he is running.

"It's difficult to assess the overall impact of development under the Davis administration," Young said. "Architecture 101 teaches us that we need a master plan for development and we've not had one in place since 1962."

Regarding the city's current talks with developers, Young was skeptical of anything getting done.

Davis and others, however, believe Mount Vernon will soon be catching up to its fellow county cities in market-rate housing projects.

White Plains architectural firm Peter F. Gaito & Associates have recently been approved for several condominium projects in the city.

Peter F. Gaito, who runs the firm with his son, Peter Gaito Jr., sees Mount Vernon as beginning to catch up with Yonkers and New Rochelle in residential development. Gaito said he believes these condo projects will be able to attract the same "young professional" clientele that buildings such as Avalon on the Sound in New Rochelle and Metro 92 in Yonkers are marketed toward.

Davis said the city is also in the process of building 130 units of housing on Third Street between Second and Third avenues.

"That's an area no one thought would come alive," he said.

On the retail side, the mayor touted last week's groundbreaking for a retail strip on First Street between 12th and 13th avenues.

"Things are moving forward," he said.