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Wednesday, February 11, 2004

College Hill's corners come alive in concept

By Kevin Aldridge
The Cincinnati Enquirer

COLLEGE HILL - Neighborhood leaders unveiled conceptual drawings Tuesday night for three residential/office/retail developments at at Hamilton Avenue and North Bend Road.

About 100 people got a chance to view concept designs for the mixed-use "Linden Park Commons" project during the College Hill Redevelopment Corp.'s annual dinner. The drawings represent the community's vision of how it would like to see the intersection revitalized, neighborhood leaders said.

Three of the four corners of the intersection - once occupied by a pharmacy, restaurant and grocery store - are now vacant.

The drawings call for a mixed-use building at the site of the vacant Kroger store. The building would feature retail shops and a three-screen theater on the first floor with offices and condominiums occupying the top floors. The plans also call for eight attached townhouses to the north on Hamilton Avenue.

The vacant Shuller's Wigwam restaurant across the street would also be converted into a mixed-use development. It would feature cafes, upscale restaurants and bars on the first floor, and offices and condos on the upper floors. A multilevel parking garage and 16 attached townhouses to the east on North Bend Road were also shown in the plans.

A mixed-use building featuring one- to three-bedroom apartments was proposed for the vacant CVS Pharmacy site. The building would also have a retail component.

"We as a community don't have a draw to bring people into College Hill to either live here or spend their money," said Marty Weldishofer, president of the College Hill Redevelopment Corp. "We would like to provide something new and more up-to-date for the young professionals, the empty nesters and the couples without children so that they would have a reason to want to live in College Hill."

Weldishofer said the drawings are only conceptual and not actual plans, but they give the community a good starting point in discussions with potential developers.

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Neighborhood leaders have already commissioned a marketing feasibility study to determine what the best uses are for the intersection.

The results, which are due in May, should tell residents if there is a possibility that their concept could become a reality.

"I'm excited," said Karen Dudley, president of the College Hill Forum. "This would make our community competitive with any community in the city, county and the region because of its diversity and uniqueness."

Vice Mayor Alicia Reece called redevelopment of College Hill's main corners one of the top two neighborhood projects in the city. Reece has pushed for redevelopment of the intersection and even tried to encourage the Kroger Co. to sell its abandoned College Hill store to the community for \$1.

"These corners have been vacant long enough," Reece said. "They are essential to the vitality of College Hill."

Cincinnati City Council has earmarked nearly \$3 million for redevelopment and revitalization efforts in College Hill. Weldishofer said a portion of the money could go toward purchasing and razing of the Shuller's Wigwam, which has been closed since 2002.

The Cincinnati Planning Commission voted Friday to freeze development of College Hill's main intersection because of rumors of an imminent sale of Shuller's to an unnamed developer.

"We want to protect it to make sure the wrong thing doesn't raise its ugly head," Weldishofer said.

Weldishofer said neighborhood leaders are trying to get the owner of the former CVS property to buy into the concept. He said the discussions so far have been positive.

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