

Kenneth J. Hopkins
Mayor

Michael E. Smith
President

Jason M. Pezzullo, AICP
Planning Director



Richard Bernardo
Robert Coupe
James Donahue
Steven Frias
Kathleen Lanphear
Ann Marie Maccarone
Frank Ritz
Thomas Zidelis

CITY PLAN COMMISSION
Cranston City Hall
869 Park Avenue, Cranston, RI 02910

MINUTES SPECIAL JOINT PUBLIC SITE VISIT OF THE CRANSTON CITY COUNCIL & CITY PLAN COMMISSION

Wednesday, October 19th – 5:30 PM

“747 Pontiac Avenue (Residential Apartment Conversion)” – AP 9, Lot 146 (portion of)

▪ **CALL TO ORDER**

City Plan Commission Chairman Mike Smith called the joint City Council—City Plan Commission Meeting to order at 5:35 p.m. at 747 Pontiac Avenue.

City Council President Chris Paplauskas called the joint City Council—City Plan Commission Meeting to order at 5:40 p.m. at 747 Pontiac Avenue.

The following City Plan Commissioners were in attendance: Chairman Mike Smith, Richard Bernardo, James Donahue, Steven Frias, Ann Marie Maccarone, Frank Ritz, and Thomas Zidelis. Commissioners Robert Coupe and Kathleen Lanphear were absent.

The following Council members were in attendance for the meeting: President Chris Paplauskas, Richard Campopiano, Aniece Germain, Jessica Marino, Matthew Reilly, and Nicole Renzulli. Councilors John Donegan, Robert Ferri, and Lammi Vargus were absent.

The following Planning Department members were in attendance: Jason M. Pezzullo, AICP, Planning Director; Douglas McLean, AICP, Principal Planner; Gregory Guertin, newly-appointed Senior Planner; Alexander Berardo, Planning Technician; and Amelia Lavalley, Planning Intern.

▪ **PRESENTATION**

The applicant team, comprised of William DiStefano and Mick Hogan, President and Vice President (respectively) of Omni Group, introduced the project to the City officials and members of the public in attendance.

Mr. DiStefano said that his company owned the property roughly twenty years ago, then sold it, and recently purchased it back after seeing it sit vacant. He summarized the current proposal as a conversion of an existing three-story building into 18 apartments.

▪ **PUBLIC COMMENT**

The applicant team then opened the meeting to public comments. The major topics of discussion concerned the housing component of the project as well as general questions about process. Various other matters were raised as well. A summary of the discussion is provided below.

HOUSING

- Would a portion of the units be dedicated as affordable housing?
 - Director Pezzullo said 15% of the units (3 out of 18) would be designated affordable, with the remainder (15 out of 18) being market-rate. Several members of the public questioned why there would be any affordable component to the project at all. Mr. DiStefano said Omni generally doesn't include affordable units in its projects, but did so in this case at the City's request. Director Pezzullo explained that the City is routinely asking developers of multifamily housing to set aside at least 15% of their proposed units as affordable to help the City keep pace with its current level of affordable rental units, which also sits just above 15%. He then briefly explained how the 15% threshold relates to the Comprehensive Permit process. Various members of the public expressed displeasure with the idea of the affordable component of the project due to concerns over possible negative impacts to their property values and asked whether it could be located elsewhere in the City.
- Would the project include Section Eight housing?
 - Director Pezzullo cautioned those present that it would be illegal for the applicant or any other landlord to discriminate against individuals with Section Eight housing vouchers by denying them the opportunity to rent purely on the basis that they would use the vouchers toward their rental payments. He reiterated that the proposal contemplates only 3 affordable units out of 18 total units and read aloud a portion of the Public Meeting Notice document, which listed the calculated monthly rental costs that renters of the affordable units could expect to pay for a one-, two-, three-, and four-person household. This, in turn, sparked questions over whether the units in this project would be large enough for three- and four-person households; Director Pezzullo clarified that those figures were included only for informational purposes.
- What would be the breakdown of the 18 proposed residential units?
 - Mr. DiStefano said the project would consist of 15 one-bedroom units and 3 studio units. One member of the public asked if the "Typical Floor Plan" included with the Meeting Notice mailer would be the floor plan for all three floors of the building; Mr. DiStefano said yes.

PROCESS

- What does the project's permitting path look like?
 - Director Pezzullo said that the proposal is currently in its Master Plan phase, which is a conceptual phase, and will need to gain approval at this and several other phases if it will ultimately be built. In the next month, he said that the Master Plan application would be heard by the City Plan Commission at its regular monthly meeting on November 1st; then it would be heard at the Council's Ordinance Committee meeting on November 17th; and then it would go before the full City Council on November 28th.
- How does the existing building's previous office use square with it's A-6 Zoning designation?
 - Director Pezzullo said the building's office use predated zoning, so it would be grandfathered (a pre-existing non-conforming use). One member of the public asked if there was a limitation on grandfathered uses when, in cases such as this, some period of time passes during which the property is not being used according to its pre-existing non-conforming use. Director

Pezzullo said he did not know the answer immediately and would review City Code after the meeting.

- How can the neighborhood be assured of compliance on the applicant's part with City Code?
 - Several members of the public expressed distrust in the process through which the project had proceeded so far, with a major point of contention being whether the applicant had begun interior demolition without having secured a building permit. Director Pezzullo noted that the Building Official, who does not attend Site Walk meetings, kept permit records and would be able to establish the timeline and resolve that disagreement between abutters and applicant. While some members of the public felt the building permit issue demonstrated untrustworthiness on the applicant's part, others said they were familiar with other Omni Group developments and knew of no apparent issues with those completed projects.

MISCELLANEOUS

- Will enough parking be provided?
 - Principal Planner Doug McLean said that under City Code, the applicant would be required to provide a minimum of 36 off-street parking spaces (2 spaces for each of the 18 units). He added that the current site plan shows the applicant would provide 41 parking spaces on-site. Some members of the public doubted that would be sufficient and asked where visitors would park if the lot is full, with several voicing a suspicion that visitors would end up parking on the surrounding side streets (particularly Norman and Myrtle Avenues).
- How would snow removal be handled?
 - Mr. DiStefano said Omni Group handles snow plowing for each of its properties and that snow would be kept on-site.
- What security measures will be integrated into the project to protect the neighborhood from potentially dangerous tenants or visitors?
 - Mr. Hogan said Omni Group performs background checks on prospective tenants. Assuming they pass those checks, the building itself will be equipped with a control system and security cameras that will allow Omni to ensure that unapproved visitors cannot sneak into the building. He added that the price point for the market rate units, and even the affordable units (albeit to a lesser extent), would be considered higher-end and should price out much of the potential for issues.
- Will the existing fence be replaced or taken down altogether? Will the parking lot similarly be gated?
 - Mr. DiStefano said Omni intends to replace the existing chain-link fence with an aluminum fence that would mimic a wrought-iron fence in appearance. He said he didn't believe it would be necessary to secure the parking lot with an additional gated entrance feature.
- Who will ensure the dumpster is not neglected?
 - Councilwoman Renzulli said the City has an ordinance that establishes how dumpsters (and trash removal in general) must be handled.
- What are the plans for the abutting smaller lot that the applicant owns and recently split off from the subject property through a Minor Subdivision?
 - Director Pezzullo first stated that the smaller lot on Norman Avenue is now a separate lot of record, so the applicant's ideas for that lot are not relevant to the project which is the topic of the Site Walk. Mr. DiStefano then said the applicant intended to build a single-family house on the lot, in keeping with its A-6 zoning. Some immediate abutters urged the applicant to leave the lot unbuilt and/or to put up a fence between it and other residential abutters. In any case, Mr. DiStefano said the applicant would not address that lot before addressing the existing three-story building.

▪ ADJOURNMENT

Plan Commission Chairman Mike Smith asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Upon motion made by Commissioner Frias, and seconded by Commission Bernardo, the City Plan Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 6:14 p.m.

Council President Chris Paplauskas asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Upon motion made by Councilor Reilly, and seconded by Councilor Campopiano, the City Council voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 6:14 p.m.