

Creating A Sense Of Place

Livingston, New Jersey, like many affluent suburban bedroom communities, used to lack a strong retail focus. Now local developers promise to build what residents want: a new downtown.

In one of the most successful communities in the country, a joint venture comprised of Jacobs Enterprises, Eastman Companies and Roseland Property Company is developing a 13.8-acre mixed-use project that promises to create an entirely new downtown for the affluent Essex County community of Livingston, New Jersey.

Livingston Town Center, which will feature 50,000 square feet of retail space, 20,000 square feet of office space and 114 residential units, is located at the northeast corner of Route 10 (Mount Pleasant Avenue) and Livingston Avenue on an underutilized site in the heart of Livingston. The project team behind Livingston Town Center plans to redevelop the area and recreate that 'heart of downtown' feeling.

"Many of [the members of] our partnership grew up in Livingston and we've driven by this property for 35 years or more," says Peter Schofel, president of Livingston-based Eastman Management Corporation. "The property's been underutilized for over 20 years. And it is literally the main street crossroads of the township. To have a town that has the affluence and the demographics and the quality of people that Livingston has, and to have no cohesive, recognizable town center is a real missed opportunity."

Retailers would be remiss to pass up Livingston. Of the 206,841 people within a 5-mile radius of the site, the median income is \$141,430 per household. Over 42.6 percent of all households have incomes over \$100,000. The school system is in the top 15 in the state. Ninety-nine percent of Livingston's high school graduates attend college; therefore, almost every household is home to one or more college graduates and, in many cases, post-graduates. Many corporate

leaders, university scholars and celebrities call Livingston home. This highly educated, high successful town is a bedroom community of both Newark, New Jersey, and New York City.

In other words, the town credentials are stellar. Schofel says he and his joint venture partners have had their eye on the property for a long time. So has the town itself. "The township's been looking to have this property upgraded for a number of years," he says. After taking the steps necessary to declare the area in need of redevelopment, the township designated Livingston Town Center, LLC (Jacobs Enterprises, Eastman Companies and Roseland Property Company) as redeveloper. "We in turn have a contract to buy the site from the seller, Livingston Manor, LLC. It's really ideal for a lifestyle center that fills the community's needs," Schofel adds.

The selected development team had worked together in the past on several local projects, including Livingston's Senior Housing development, the Village of Livingston and several prominent office parks, such as Eisenhower Corporate Center.

George Jacobs, president of Clifton, New Jersey-based Jacobs Enterprises, says the partnership has spent the past year working with the town to develop and fine-tune their plan for the new center. "The tenants will be those that are going to fit well with the community," he says. "Livingston has over 200,000 people in the immediate trade area and we're looking for very high-quality tenancy. It's not a strip center. We've designed the center to have a pedestrian feel to it."

No big, bulky boxes need apply. In fact, the largest tenant allowed is 6,000 square feet. The town has held a tight rein on the development team and even



imposed a number of restrictions to ensure that Livingston Town Center is a lifestyle center of the highest possible quality — not just an ordinary strip center. The developers are working closely with the town planning board and administration to meet all conditions and controls on materials and construction, as set forth by the Livingston Town Center Ordinance.

"The old owners asked permission 4 or 5 years ago to build a supermarket-anchored strip center on the site," Jacobs says. "The entire community rose up and said, 'That's not what we want. This is downtown. We don't want a typical highway-oriented strip center,' and defeated it." Instead, the partnership will build a community, complete with 114 new families that will move in to occupy the high-end residential units planned for the site.

High, strict barriers to entry are not unusual for small New Jersey towns such as Livingston. The Livingston Mall, Jacobs notes, took more than 10 years to get approved.

Getting Livingston Town Center approved has not been a cakewalk either. "The site was the subject of litigation," Jacobs says. "The family that we are purchasing the property from had owned it for about 100 years. Through generational changes, they ended up not being in the development business any longer.



Peter Schofel (left) and George Jacobs (right).

When they were not prepared to do what the town asked them to do, they ended up in litigation. We ended up becoming the 'white knights' to come in and resolve the conflict between what the town was trying to create and what the family was willing to do. It became a redevelopment district, and the town dictated what it wants here. What it wants is the project we're building."

Currently occupying the project site is 40,000 square feet of 70-year-old retail space and a 7-acre debris-laden forest. The developers plan to start from scratch and recreate a downtown from there. The only existing tenant that is expected to carry over to the new de-

velopment is Silverman's, which has occupied the site for roughly 50 years.

Jacobs says the goal is to make Livingston Town Center a genuine gathering place complete with many varied food purveyors. "The town has designed — and we have very happily included — a lot of outdoor seating, along with second-floor verandas, patios and balconies." As for retailers, Jacobs says they are seeking high-end merchants like Talbots, Chico's, The Limited, etc.

All of the retail is ground-floor with either office or residential condos above it. Another 7 to 9 acres, called the Residential District, features two- and three-bedroom townhomes priced in the \$650,000 range, as well as 17 \$800,000 single-family homes.

The Federal-style architecture was designed to conjure up images of Princeton, Harvard Yard and historic Philadelphia, while many buildings were modeled after the township's high school and municipal buildings, complete with a lot of brick and masonry block accents, says Schofel.

"We're spending an extraordinary amount of time, energy and resources on the sidewalks and plazas," Jacobs says.

"We'll have a fountain, sculpture and street furniture of the highest quality. We engaged one of the most talented firms in the country as our architects: RTKL."

The Livingston Town Center team hopes to be complete with approvals by early summer and ready for construction by fall 2003. The first retail is expected to move in 1 year later. At press time, no confirmed tenants had been announced for the project.

"It's an exciting job," Jacobs says. "It's creating a downtown where there really was none. All the towns around us have focused on the train lines. Towns like Summit, Chatham, Montclair and Westfield have downtowns that were pedestrian-oriented with the train as an anchor. Livingston doesn't have that; it grew up around the car."

Now future Livingston residents can grow up around Livingston Town Center. **SCB**

— Katie Foxworth and Jerrold France



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