

A LIVINGSTON THEY'VE NEVER SEEN



NOAH K. MURRAY/THE STAR LEDGER

Real estate developers Peter Schofel, left, and George Jacobs with a model of the new Livingston Town Center.

Project would bring a downtown to township

BY ROB WILLIAMS
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

It's the downtown Livingston never had. Older New Jersey suburbs — Bloomfield, Montclair and Summit among them — had a train station around which downtowns sprung. Not Livingston. "People who came out here wanted their back yards and garages and then found they missed their downtown," said Beth Lippman, who has lived in this 14-square-mile community for 23 years. "Downtowns are places for the community, where you can see what is going on, and people miss that."

That sense of community might be at hand in what has been dubbed Livingston Town Center, what its proponents call a "downtown lifestyle center." A center that would have a pedestrian feel, a mix of such upscale retailers as Talbots and the Limited and luxury residences in a town where 27 percent of the households make more than \$150,000 a year.

If the i's are dotted and the t's crossed, this new \$60 million made-to-order downtown with its stand-out clock tower could rise within three years.

"I think it's going to impact in a positive way," said Lippman, who is also executive director of Livingston Community Partnership Management, the township's business improvement district entity. "It's going to provide services within walking distance, provide retail and residential space, something (the township) wants and needs."

It would replace what many now consider an eyesore, a view of empty storefronts and dilapidated buildings, part of a strip mall of sorts abutting several acres of woods at one of Livingston's busiest intersections.

"Visually, it will be such a change," said Charles Tahaney, who as township manager has watched the

(See LIVINGSTON, Page 36)



A drawing of the project, which would include houses, retailers and businesses. "It's made to be the focal point of the town," Jacobs said.

LIVINGSTON

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 33

Project would create a downtown

starts and stops of the development vision for more than two decades.

Some 3.8 acres at Livingston and Mount Pleasant avenues would become a retail village, with shops and restaurants. On eight acres of woodlands behind it would rise more than 100 single-family homes and two- to three-bedroom townhouses and condominiums.

Those driving by would notice five buildings on the corner designed in the Federal style, imitating the red-brick design of Livingston's Town Hall, the police station, the high school and the library.

Behind those façades will be more than 50,000 square feet of space for offices, retailers and restaurants, with a limit of 6,000 square feet per tenant to keep the small-town feel.

The remaining eight acres will house 17 single-family homes, 77 townhouses and 24 condominium apartments. A 228-space parking garage near the commercial property would include a grouping of townhouses with an outdoor pool on the top level.

The near-arrival of construction

comes after years of wrangling between township officials and the property's corporate owner, Livingston Manor Inc.

The property, once known as Livingston Manor Shopping Plaza, housed a variety of small businesses at the busy crossroads.

"It's was always the heart of town," said developer George Jacobs of the Jacobs Enterprises in Livingston, who graduated from Livingston High School in 1970 and moved back to town in 1985. "You had the theater, Silverman's; there used to be a bakery, a pharmacy and a Chinese restaurant."

There was the Colony Theater, which opened in 1941 and went through a series of owners before it closed in 2001, and Silverman's, a general store that once housed old-fashioned soda fountains. It became so popular the locale is informally known as Silverman's Square.

Some time ago, Silverman's relocated as part of the redevelopment agreement and is to eventually move into the new village-style downtown.

The subject of long-debated property was the deteriorating strip, which received an occasional face-lift through the years. As surrounding businesses popped up along Route 10 and Livingston Avenue and the storefronts slowly emptied, the corporate owner, Livingston Manor Inc., unsuccessfully pushed to build an Edwards Super Store there.

"It was a sore spot for a long time," Lippman said.

Later, Livingston rolled out its own vision when, in 2000, it directed the planning board to investigate the possibility of declaring the area a place in need of redevelopment and giving the governing body a say in its future. By year's end, the council did just that.

Livingston officials and the property owner negotiated, ultimately deciding on a consortium of three developers, all of whom have lived or developed property in Livingston.

"We are the local guys," Jacobs said.

The pot was sweetened for the developers — Roseland Property Co. of Roseland and Jacobs Enterprises Inc. and Eastman Management Corp., both of Livingston — who reached an agreement to make payments in lieu of taxes for 20 years with an annual payment of \$354,000. The property now nets \$200,000.

Jacobs said the developers expect to close on the sale of property as soon as state approvals come in, with a groundbreaking sometime early next year.

"It will be a monumentally great thing," Jacobs said. "It's made to be the focal point of the town."

Rob Williams covers Livingston, Maplewood, Millburn and South Orange. He can be reached at rwilliams@starledger.com or (973) 392-5731.