

Council likes Courtyard plan Proposal includes a 90-car parking deck and new apartments

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Writer

CHAPEL HILL - The Town Council likes the sound of a bustling Courtyard.

Council members welcomed a plan Wednesday night for improving The Courtyard retail complex on the corner of West Franklin and South Roberson streets in the West End of downtown. The plan would add a 90-car parking deck and add stories to some buildings for 19 new apartments.

A company called Franklin West LLC plans to buy the property this month from Wachovia, which foreclosed on it as former owner Spencer Young went bankrupt.

"Thank you for investing in downtown Chapel Hill," Councilwoman Laurin Easthom told the developers. "I think it's going to be a great improvement."

Wednesday's presentation was only a "concept plan," meaning the council gave the developers some non-binding feedback in advance of a formal application. The only sticking points were the exterior aesthetics of the buildings and the parking deck's blocking of emergency access to Basnight Lane, which could be cured by a new alley proposed by neighboring property owner P.H. Craig.

Businesses came and went during Young's four years of ownership. The Stock Exchange, a consignment shop fronting Franklin Street, had already moved out early in Young's tenure after a sewer leak. 3Cups beverages, Sandwhich and Locopops all found new Chapel Hill locations; Baba Ghannouj Mediterranean cafe and Bliss Boutique Bakery couldn't survive.

In fact, the only long-term retail tenants are restaurants Bonne

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"The site right now is a physical and emotional eyesore," said Ted Kairys, a partner in Franklin West LLC. "It's been a detriment really to the West End of town and to the town itself."

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But already under Wachovia's new management Hawthorne Retail Partners, The Courtyard has been restocking. Veronique's Crepes and the Village Baker took over the former 3Cups/Bliss space, Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe has moved into the old Sandwich, and L'incontro pizzeria is set to replace Baba Ghannouj, with its unique rooftop patio.

Feuds With Everyone

"When I moved to town, The Courtyard was really one of the great spots of downtown, and I'm looking forward to it being that again," said land planner Scott Radway, representing Craig. "It has a lot to do with the temperament of one of those prior owners as to why things didn't move forward."

Young had left contractors unpaid and refused to pay rent to Craig, who owns the back part of The Courtyard's parking lot due to a strange legal arrangement that goes back decades.

Craig barricaded his portion of the parking lot, putting The Courtyard out of compliance with its permit and prompting local officials to intervene.

The Town of Chapel Hill reserved on-street parking spaces for Courtyard employees, Orange County provided space in its nearby lot for valet parking, and the Chapel Hill Downtown Partnership paid for mediation between Young and Craig. But customers lost the convenient on-site parking they were used to.

The Courtyard's development permit requires 79 parking spaces, including 23 on Craig's land. The new on-site parking deck would eliminate the need to lease those off-site spaces.

Veronique King, the Parisian crepe maker, said The Courtyard's "revival" will happen with or without the town's approving the new apartments or the parking deck, but it would certainly help.

She said many of her customers are world-traveling retirees who enjoy the international flavor of The Courtyard.

"You can't ask the old ladies to walk," she said. "We want Chapel Hill to be part of the Triangle and be competing with Durham and Raleigh. We want people to come from a long way."

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The Town and Others Tried to Help