



Approvals Sought for Proposed STEAM School on IBM Campus

By CAROL REIF

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SOMERS, N.Y. - The folks who hope to open a private school at the old IBM campus in Somers by 2021 are seeking input from the public and local consultants as part of the first step in a long environmental review.

Representatives of the Route 100 site's owners, Sebastian Capital and its future tenants, 294 Route 100 LLC, appeared before the Town Board Thursday, Aug. 8, to catch it up on the proposed STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) school, the academic side of which is known as Evergreen Ridge LLC.

According to its legal representative, Mark P. Weingarten, the "world-class, for-profit" school for ninth- through 12th-graders will, if it wins zoning, site plan, and other approvals, be built in three phases. The school, and related facilities, will occupy 345 acres of the 723-acre site. Students would pay an annual tuition of \$37,000 and an extra \$12,000 for room and board. About 85 percent are expected to live on campus.

Once subdivided, the land will include two other parcels, the fate of which has provoked interest on the part of town officials and residents.

According to Weingarten, of DelBello Donnellan Weingarten Wise & Wiederkehr LLP, the zoning on the remaining land will remain OB-100 (Office Business), which allows for multi-family uses. However, the lawyer said Thursday, the applicants are asking that that usage be removed. There are no plans at present, Weingarten added, for developing the other two parcels.

Sebastian Capital, the landlord, also owns the former Pepsico facility in Somers. It purchased the IBM site in 2017 for \$31.75 million and owns more than 3 million square feet of buildings in the tri-state area.

The applicants believe that their proposal is the most "environmentally sensitive" re-use of the property and the five, iconic I.M. Pei designed inter-connected buildings, which will be converted into classrooms and living quarters for students.

He cited the planned removal of nearly 10 acres of paved areas, now used for parking. There are currently about 3,200 spaces; the school will require only 1,100. This could reduce storm water runoff impacts, an important thing in light of the site's proximity to a reservoir, he said. The site is located within an East of Hudson (EOH) watershed.

He also said that the applicant's own studies have shown that vehicular traffic will be greatly reduced during peak hours.

The applicants have answered a multitude of questions from various town entities, such as the Planning Board, engineering department, and Open Space Committee, as part of the EAF (Environmental Assessment Form), the first step in the State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) process.

Any questions that remain will be addressed when the applicants re-submit environmental documents. After the town reviews them, the updated information will be made available to the public, said Syrette Dym, the town's director of planning.

The town declared itself the lead agency in that process last fall. In June, the applicants submitted a project assessment report that covered topics such as drainage, traffic, natural resources, and water/sewage usage.

According to the team's Bonnie Von Ohlsen, a planner and landscape architect with Kimley-Horn of NY, engineering consultants, the campus is operating under an existing Westchester County Department of Health permit for its water supply—existing wells—and planned to seek the OK for more wells to support later phases of the project. Its own sewage treatment plant has "adequate" capacity for Phases 1 and 2 (when grade 11 will be added) but applicants will have to seek a "modification" of its SPDES (state pollutant discharge elimination system) permit for Phase 3, when grade 12 will be on board.

If all approvals are in place by early next year, it is possible that Phase 1 of the school, or grades 9-10—could be completed in 2021. Eventually, the school hopes to have 1,800 students.

Besides playing fields, tennis courts and hiking/running trails, a new athletic facility/field house and arts center are planned.

As part of the presentation Thursday, Evergreen's chief, Tim DiScipio, said the school will offer all the required core subjects, AP courses and "unique emerging growth field electives."

Senior and mid-level school team members have been identified and school and staff strategies are "being decided."

Evergreen, which is seeking the state's "conditional approval" for the school intends to make an informal public presentation on the academic end of things this fall, specifically the curriculum/course catalog, pedagogical approach and campus offerings.

Meanwhile, Evergreen has met with local educators, such as school Superintendent Dr. Raymond Blanch, he said.

Many folks are curious about what the school will be called; DiScipio said Evergreen is very close to making a decision on the school's name.

TOWN INPUT

Vicky Gannon, a member of the town Planning Board, wondered where all the asphalt from the deconstructed parking areas would be going.

Weingarten said it would either be used to fill in holes made by the construction of the athletic facility, or would have to be trucked off site.

Resident Mark Koppel, a longtime educator, brought up the subject of light and noise pollution. Referring to spectators at the outdoor fields, Koppel allowed that "cheering would be OK" but the music that's played at sports events to evoke a "rah rah atmosphere" would "drive me and the neighbors insane."

He also asked about the possibility of the school's building sidewalks linking the hamlet of Somers' business district, and the Purdys train station, to the school.

Weingarten assured him that, with the latest technology available, there should be no light spillage from the site. There are no plans for outdoor public address systems, he added.

As far as sidewalks go—a topic that is on a lot of folks' minds—that would be a very expensive proposition, Weingarten said. The applicants are looking into funding opportunities at "higher levels of government," he said.

Michael Barnhart and Robert MacGregor, of the town's Open Space Committee, raised questions about the school's potential impact on flora and fauna.

Barnhart mentioned that Evans Associates, the applicant's environmental team, had surveyed the wildlife and other natural features at the site back in September. But, he said, that time of year is not ideal for such observations as many critters have already done their mating and migrating.

Barnhart raised the possibility that, since the site has not been actively used for a while, that wet meadow habitats may have re-established themselves and, he said, the presence of sensitive species such as the barbed turtle, ribbon snake and Dion Skipper, a type of butterfly, "cannot be ruled out."

Barnhart suggested that the applicants take measures to protect amphibians and other wildlife by installing curbing with a more gentle slope—so they can crawl over them—and by closing off construction areas with special fencing or hay bales.

He also pointed to plans to remove more than 600 trees at the site. The types of trees need to be listed, in case any are endangered. And, Barnhart said, any replacement trees need to be varied.

He also called for a plan for removing invasive plants.

Supervisor Rick Morrissey brought up the topic of safety and security at a campus that could eventually house close to 2,000 students, not to mention dozens of staff members and other employees.

The town also wants more details on the school's potential impact on emergency services such as police and fire, he said. These things will be addressed during the fall presentation, Weingarten promised.

Morrissey suggested that Evergreen also touch base with town police Chief Michael Driscoll for suggestions.

Chris Zaberto, a member of the town's Planning Board, wondered about the school's "business model" and if it could sustain itself if it doesn't reach its goal of 1,800 students. A former member of the local Energy Environment Committee, he asked what energy-saving measures the school planned.

Weingarten said that figure was not required for a "full economic return" in the school's early stages. "Eighteen-hundred is the full buildout," he explained.

Another member of the team assured Zaberto that all sustainability measures would be taken. Other entities involved are: Pei Partnership Architects, KG+D Architects, Kimley-Horn, planning and design engineering consultants; Triton Partners, an investment firm; Avison Young, a real estate firm; Insite Engineering, Surveying and Landscape Architecture and Evans Associates Environmental.