

Community

Proposed STEAM School to Present its Plans

By CAROL REIF
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Plans for a STEAM academy at the former IBM campus just keep rolling along in Somers.

On Thursday, March 12, the Town Board will hold a pair of public hearings on the proposed private, for-profit high school. As lead agency, it will say yea or nay to the developer's bid to amend the town's OB-100 (Office-Business) District and its 2016 Comprehensive Plan.

The Planning Board, meanwhile, is handling Evergreen Ridge LLC's applications for site plan and preliminary subdivision approvals.

It was the latter that seemed to cause the most concern for folks who spoke at the Planning Board's public hearing on Wednesday, Feb. 12.

The landlords, Sebastian Capital LLC, wants to divide the Route 100 site up into four pieces. The school and its athletic and maintenance facilities would occupy two parcels on about 345 of its 723 acres.

The remaining acreage's zoning — OB-100 — won't change.

Folks have been wondering what's going to pop up on the other two parcels down the road.

Both Mark Weingarten, the applicant's lawyer, and Richard Williams of Insite, its engineers, insisted Wednesday that there is no development "planned or contemplated at this time."

However, that doesn't mean the new owners of those parcels, whoever they might be, can't seek town approvals for an office or housing project, according to Planning Board member Chris Zaberto.

"They would have to go through the same processes as the school applicants," he said Wednesday, adding that he "felt confident" that that wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

Board member Vicky Gannon, noting that any future development would “open the book” said the town would certainly be looking at “cumulative impacts.”

Bluestone Peak Academy, the official name for the STEAM (Science Technology Engineering Arts Math) school, hopes to open in 2021 and eventually have 1,800 students.

A PROMISE

Lincolndale’s Patrick DeSena, who served on the Town Board for 16 years and was there when the IBM and Pepsico projects were approved, felt “obligated” Wednesday to speak up about the requested subdivision.

“I want to make sure the ultimate impact on those 745 acres is no more than we promised,” he said.

Planning Board member Nancy Gerbino, however, reminded DeSena that the Town Board was not “guaranteeing how much IBM was going to impact the town because it was always possible — because of how much land was rezoned OB-100 — that there could always be more factories built there.”

“ ... Same goes for Pepsi. Think about it: It hasn’t changed; it’s always been there,” she added.

Weingarten reiterated that developers have no active plans for developing the other parcels.

“It’s locked in,” he said. “We’re going to have to wait and see how the school works out.”

As far as the school project’s potential impact on local traffic goes, it would be “nothing close” to that generated by IBM, Weingarten said.

IBM’s employees arrived and left at peak traffic hours. The school will need 2,000 fewer parking spaces.

The applicants also own the former Pepsico site down the road.

“They made an enormous investment here because they believe in the town and they want to be good corporate citizens,” Weingarten said.

DeSena said he was worried about the “parcels north and south,” and not necessarily any traffic the school might generate.

“We hope to be back here someday on that (the other parcels). I don’t know if I’ll be around but ...” Weingarten responded.

The school is also seeking the town’s approval of its plans for stormwater management, erosion and sediment control, wetland and watercourse protection, steep slopes protection, and tree preservation.

That bought up the subjects of water resources and groundwater pollution.

Although IBM may have been only one culprit, the town’s drinking water has suffered – and continues to suffer – from salt contamination, requiring more than a few local businesses, residences — and Town Hall — to install treatment systems.

Local engineer Timothy S. Allen of Bibbo Associates said his firm had reviewed IBM and Pepsi for the town back in the 1980s.

Water quality and quantity “is going to be an issue here,” he said.

Allen had no objections to the school project itself, but feels environmental impacts have to be carefully scrutinized.

Planning Board member Dennis McNamara wondered why road salt was still used “anywhere in this town.”

“We are a community of wells,” he explained.

Williams said the applicants have engaged a hydrologist who is developing a salt management plan for the project.

Resident Eric Marcos, who lives off Route 116 near one of IBM’s former driveways, is also “excited” about the proposed school.

However, he’s afraid that it might affect his water supplies.

When the Marcoses moved in, they were told they had to drill a well that was at least 600 feet deep.

Why? "There's a lot of straws in the drink (meaning aquifer) from IBM across the road," he was told.

Williams told the board that they will be testing the wells and will be looking for new water sources during Phases 2 and 3 of the project.

"Since there are no public water supplies, we will have to make sure we are not impacting off-site wells," he said.

There were a few other things on folks' minds, including the new school's appearance.

Said Gerbino: "As happy as everyone was with IBM, what they weren't prepared for was what IBM looked like."

The town did not have a legal say regarding architecture back in the 1980s.

So the complex's distinctive glass pyramids, designed by famed architect I.M. Pei, came as "quite a shock," Gerbino said.

As a result, the town created the Architectural Review Board (ARB).

While applicants only intend to revamp the inside of the five buildings to accommodate classrooms and dorms, they do plan to build a new fieldhouse – with input from Pei Associates.

Gerbino said she definitely thought the ARB should get involved.

NEXT STEPS

The Planning Board can't really move forward on the applications until the Town Board does its thing.

(The Town Board is holding a public hearing on March 12. Representatives of the school will make a presentation on curriculum and campus life on that date as well.)

So the Planning Board adjourned its public hearing on the STEAM school until April 15.