



The Progress-Index

Developer wins commission approval to turn factory into condos

By:CLIFF DAVIS, Staff Writer 06/03/2004

High Street residents are concerned about construction's impact on neighborhood

PETERSBURG - Acclaimed Richmond developer Robin Miller won the first round of approval last night for what city resident Charles DuBois called the single most important thing to happen in the city in 25 years.

But the would-be savior of the former Seward Luggage property dug in his heels over parking and buffer plans for the site, alienating some neighbors on High Street and possibly setting the stage for rage when the proposal goes before the City Council in the near future.

Miller said city parking and space requirements prevent him from making those requested changes.

He told the Planning Commission that, upon his purchase of the property and the requisite approvals by the city, his company would immediately begin to stabilize some crumbling portions of the historic structures' brick walls.

The eastern portion of the property will be the first to be renovated. In about six years, the shell of the old buildings will hold several hundred townhouses and condominium dwellings, geared toward young professionals and empty-nesters, Miller said.

"The demographics (for the above people) in Richmond are strong and rental rates are high. A significant

number of that market would love to live in Petersburg once they see how beautiful the city is," Miller said.

Some space on the property could be converted into small businesses, such as a coffee shop, he added.

The Seward property abuts High Street, the home of Planning Commission member Zelma Taylor, who, along with the rest of the commission, voted to recommend approval of the project.

High Street is the benchmark for development of historic neighborhoods in the city, according to Leonard Muse, Petersburg director of planning and community development.

But High Street resident Chris Calkins agonized over Miller's plans to cut down the vegetative buffer between his property and the Seward site, including a mature magnolia tree and a pecan tree.

"Should you push your property up to the line, the streetscape would be compromised," Calkins said.

Other residents worried about privacy, with "hundreds of eyes peering down at them;" the blocking off of a portion of Commerce Street to become a cul-de-sac for the development; and what city resident Dale Pittman called the "squishiness," meaning uncertainty, of the project's second phase.

Some urged the commission to take more time before making a recommendation to council on an issue of such grave importance. But no one voiced flat out opposition to the project. Calkins himself said he wished it great success. Miller & Associates' other projects - generally the conversion of neglected historic structures into facilities with modern applications - include Linden

Tower and the former Johnston Willis Hospital in Richmond, as well as the Parson's House, significant as a stop on the anti-slavery Underground Railroad. * Cliff Davis may be reached at 732-3456, ext. 254.

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