Amid more than six hours of City Council meetings Tuesday night, a full roster of significant news about downtown East Lansing development projects emerged. We saw changes to the site plans of both the Graduate Hotel and Center City. We heard talk of the death of the Royal Vlahakis proposal. And, once again, Council dodged all questions about the eBay land sale of that million-dollar property on Merritt Road.

ELi will be bringing you expanded reports on major issues, but here?s a quick rundown of what you might want to know.
The Royal Vlahakis project isn't moving as planned.

For now, developers Royal Apartments and Paul Vlahakis remain in an agreement with East Lansing's Downtown Development Authority (DDA) for purchase of public land on Evergreen Avenue to use for a $190 million project [2] at the northwest corner of Abbot Road and Albert Avenue.

The project has been controversial because of its size, height, design, components, and the nature of the public-private deal, which calls for long-term lease of several pieces of public land.

Tuesday night, Director of Planning Tim Dempsey and City Council Members indicated that the developers still haven't submitted materials due under the agreement made four months ago. The developers have been sent a notice saying they must produce what is required by the agreement within 30 days. You can see that letter here [3].

Mayor Mark Meadows says if the developers don't meet the requirements of that letter, the DDA will open up the Evergreen Avenue properties to a Request for Proposals.

That means all developers will then be invited to make proposals about what to do with the DDA-owned land on Evergreen Avenue. (See the draft RFP here [4].)

Vlahakis has not responded to an inquiry from ELi last week.

Is there another big project coming on Grand River Avenue or Albert Avenue?
Tuesday night, Council debated and voted on Ordinance 1449, an ordinance that had been specifically created to support the Royal Vlahakis proposal by allowing 160-foot-tall buildings where those developers want to put one on the Dublin Square property.

Members of Peoples Church came out in force to strongly oppose the ordinance, as did their attorney, George Brookover. The image below shows how the project would look from above the back of Peoples Church.

At the meeting, Council Members Shanna Draheim and Aaron Stephens asked repeatedly why Council was moving on this ordinance when the Royal Vlahakis proposal seems to be falling apart.

Apparently to placate the Church, Meadows proposed changing the ordinance to *not include* the Dublin Square properties. Ultimately he proposed including only land east of Abbot Road, west of Bailey Street, between Albert Avenue and Grand River Avenue.


Why bother to pass an ordinance for increased height when there?s no project that needs it right now? The obvious answer is that one may be coming ? that Meadows knows something Draheim and Stephens don?t. Draheim essentially asked just that, but Meadows did not respond.

There has been talk of Ballein Management doing another project along Grand River Avenue, and as we?ve reported, the Bailey parking lot is not actually owned by the City [5] so that, too, could be redeveloped. Other potential sites for redevelopment also exist in that rectangle identified in Ordinance 1449.

We?ll have a longer report on Ordinance 1449 in the coming days.

*Center City won?t have pavers in the alley after all.*

One of the design selling points of Center City was attractive spaces for pedestrians in the
alleyway and along Albert Avenue. The developers promised to create a winding brick path in the long cement trail of the alley.

Now that?s not happening.

City Manager George Lahanas told Council Tuesday night that the developers have decided to do just plain cement in the alleyway, because of all the trucks that are going to be driving through. Trucks are expected to be coming and going frequently in that alley for deliveries to businesses and pick-up of trash.

Lahanas told Council that staff believes they can approve this site plan change for Center City without asking Council to vote on an amended site plan. Council Members said nothing in response. So, staff will approve the change.

Harbor Bay and Ballein Management, developers of Center City, had also promised a European-style village road along Albert Avenue between Abbot Road and M.A.C. Avenue ? something called a woonerf. There would be curbless streets with attractive paving stones meant to calm traffic and invite pedestrians.

Now that also seems to be out of the design, with a standard roadway design emerging.

One more thing: Center City was supposed to start paying the City $200,000 a year for the ground lease of public land (old Parking Lot 1) starting in March of this year. Now City staff says it will be July.

The Graduate Hotel developers did have to get Council?s permission for their site plan change.
Staff apparently didn’t find they could approve a site plan change for The Graduate Hotel, being built as part of the DRW Convexity Park District project, just east of Peoples Church. Tuesday night, Council was asked to vote on The Graduate’s request to eliminate about 3,200 square feet of retail space on the ground floor, replacing that space with lobby hotel space and the hotel fitness center.

The Graduate developers would replace what would have been retail storefront space with murals on the space along Evergreen Avenue, and there would be a public courtyard space, as shown in the new rendering below. (This rendering has the viewer looking south. The street shown is Evergreen Avenue. The hotel is the building on the right. On the left is DRW Convexity’s "Building A," under construction at the corner of Abbot Road and Grand River Avenue. MSU is seen in the distance, across Grand River Avenue.)

Along Grand River Avenue, what would have been retail storefront space will be windows for the hotel lobby, lobby café, and the fitness room. They say this is necessary because retail tenants are scarce and the first-floor space is needed for hotel amenities and operations.

Council Members weren’t thrilled with having the hotel fitness center now stand at the southwest corner of that building, along Grand River Avenue. Altmann called the change a “bait and switch” and said the developers should have known what they would need when they proposed the site plan last year.

But the rest of Council went along with the change, approving it 4-1.
Stephens was particularly happy that the hotel managers are planning to work hard to encourage students to come use the public spaces of the hotel as study space, as they do with the Ann Arbor hotel, the lobby of which is shown above. The East Lansing hotel lobby will have a long study table along with smaller gathering spaces, all with lots of outlets, and a coffee bar.

The hotel reps told Council that The Graduate uses this approach because drawing students ultimately means drawing their families to the hotel as paying guests.

And we still have no answers on the eBay land sale.

Before the general meeting, at a budget work session, Council had been talking about the City’s upcoming budget, saying they want to maximize revenue from the sale of public lands. So, once again, I used public comment to ask questions about the City’s online auction of the million-dollar former Department of Public Works site on eBay.

Indicating I was reporting for ELi, I asked again how City staff decided whom to notify about the eBay auction? I asked again why staff hadn’t notified all parties who had expressed interest in the property? And I asked again why the property was auctioned off before the vote on an ordinance that had been designed to increase the value of the property?
I noted that the mayor has said twice there would be answers forthcoming to these questions and we've had none.

The mayor thanked me and moved on in the agenda, without having addressed our inquiries.

Note: This story was updated on April 11 at 8:30 a.m. to include the letter [3] to Royal Apartments and Vlahakis Development.

Related Categories:
Big Development [8]
Center City District [9]
City Council [10]
Downtown Development Authority [12]
Government [13]
Finance and Taxes [14]
Park District [15]

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