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A greener Whiteco finally moves ahead *\$600K in concessions paves way for summer groundbreaking*

By DREW CARTER

It won't be any leaner, shorter or less dense, but a healthier Whiteco development is coming soon to Harlem Avenue and Ontario Street.

After a year of negotiations and delay, Whiteco Residential will reach into its pocket for more than \$600,000 in village board-negotiated improvements, including a \$400,000 investment in village-run affordable housing programs and more than \$200,000 to comply with LEED environmentally friendly building standards.

"I think this agreement demonstrates Whiteco's commitment to Oak Park and this project," said Jim Prescott, a Whiteco spokesman. He said the negotiations have made an "excellent project even better. ... Whiteco and the village board have accomplished something many people didn't think could be done."

The developer will pay three installments to the village for affordable housing. Just how the money will be spent has not been decided, said Trustee Greg Marsey, for whom Whiteco was a primary factor in deciding to run for the village board.

But Whiteco will not provide affordable housing within the new building. "That's been something they've been steadfastly against from the beginning," Marsey said. It's possible the village could fund a program to make some Whiteco units affordable, though, he said.

The development, controversial from its start because of the way the former village board negotiated a deal in private with Whiteco, will bring 200 apartments, six townhouses and 14,000 square feet of commercial space to be occupied by Trader Joe's, a specialty grocer. The project will add 500 parking spaces, too.

The former village board finalized the deal last April, and Whiteco could have moved forward with the project at any time after that. When the new village board took over last May, a majority called for negotiations with the developer.

"Whiteco's willingness to allay community concerns even though they had a signed contract in hand demonstrates their desire to win over opponents and to be welcomed as a valued member of the community," Village President David Pope said in a press release.

Asked Monday why the company would negotiate and make concessions when it had a deal in hand, Pope said, "Whiteco is going to be operating this thing for at least the next 10 years. ... They really want to have an amicable relationship with everyone they come across."

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Marsey said that wasn't always the case. Explaining the long delay, he said, "This was a very sensitive negotiation because in the beginning Whiteco basically was unwilling to negotiate at all." Talks began only after the board voted to delay the Holley Court garage expansion, he said. Eventually things improved, allowing the village to negotiate the deal.

Pope said the deal should satisfy "all but the most extreme" of the deal's critics. The LEED

(Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification will be "highly innovative for a building of its type in the upper Midwest, and in turn will mark this as a signature development in keeping with the community's legacy of architectural innovation," Pope said in a Monday interview. The changes from the previous design will improve energy efficiency, water conservation and encourage walking.

The village's Public Works facility being built on South Boulevard will also meet LEED standards.

"I think we accomplished as much as we possibly could given we had an existing contract with them," Marsey said. He, too, commended the developer for working with the village.

Whiteco has also agreed "to be mindful" of using high-quality design and high-quality materials, will promote ride sharing and mass transit to reduce neighborhood traffic, will add a pedestrian entrance to Trader Joe's, and will add a rooftop garden to the top of the lower residential building.

The building's height, lot coverage and building orientation were set by the deal approved by the village board last year. Marsey said the village asked for concessions on density and massing, but the developer would not budge on those aspects.

Marsey said the negotiated gains outweigh the losses—lost tax revenues, dispirited downtown retailers. "Any losses we've sustained are only temporary," he said. Before beginning the negotiations, the board looked at how a delay might affect the village financially. They found that because the property is in the Downtown Tax Increment Financing District, whose value has risen faster than expected, losses weren't too great to proceed. "We had some headroom, if you will," he said.

The village began negotiating a development deal with Whiteco in early 2002. The project could break ground this summer, as early as August. Prescott could not say when Trader Joe's or residents could move in.

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