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staff photo by adam anik

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Yet, this past August, Pinnacle CEO Brian Stolar surprised the municipal Economic Development Committee when he presented a new set of plans with no municipal components, preserving the residential and commercial units included in the 2015 plan.

Several EDC members interpreted this as a fixed decision on part of Pinnacle and Hampshire, but Mayor Robert Jackson referred to the new plan as merely another scenario under consideration, and that the municipal center was not "off the table."

Since the township's need for new structures that meet modern standards has hardly diminished, the question has now been raised, where else could the new center be located?

Municipal Planning Board Vice Chair Jason DeSalvo said, "We've got three possible parcels of land in play, the Lackawanna Redevelopment Plan, Gateway Phase II, and [the current municipal site]. Those are the only big tracts of land that could potentially be used."

If the municipal complex is formally removed from the Lackawanna plan and the Township Council still wishes to upgrade from its current building, then "that leaves [its current site], Gateway Phase II, or some combination of both," according to DeSalvo.

A combination of both could get complicated, as the Gateway Phase II and Lackawanna projects have long been fiscally intertwined.

The Gateway Phase II Redevelopment Plan concerns several properties on the north side of Bloomfield Avenue at the corners of Valley Road and Bell Street, including the current MPD Headquarters and several township-owned lots behind it.

The township had rationalized the move to Lackawanna Plaza, where it would lease the new municipal buildings from Pinnacle and Hampshire, by offsetting the cost through leasing its own properties at 205 Claremont Ave. and the ones in Gateway Phase II to other developers, as well as Payment-In-Lieu of Taxes agreements for the Lackawanna project.

According to township financial consultant Bob Benecke, those deals could lead to cash flows totaling \$3.4-3.6 million. Some people perceived that Pinnacle and Hampshire looked to remove the municipal components from the Lackawanna Project because the finances in that deal tipped too much in the township's favor. DeSalvo quoted Stolar as saying, "We ran the numbers, and the municipal thing did not work."

Should the township raze the current MPD HQ and Municipal Building to rebuild on those sites, it would do so without the revenue streams Benecke delineated, although a PILOT agreement for the Lackawanna development could foreseeably still be arranged.

The council's three liaisons to the EDC, 4th Ward Township Councilmember Renée Baskerville, 2nd Ward Councilmember Robin Schlager, and 3rd Ward Councilmember Sean Spiller, all confirmed that the option to rebuild at 205 Claremont Ave. has been discussed, but according to Schlager, new complications might arise there as well.

"It could all potentially be housed there, but that is not a good location," said Schlager, referring to a scenario in which both the MPD and municipal offices were included on one property. "Having police cars there is not conducive to the area or the police."

Schlager explained that the problem is twofold, in that it's important for the MPD to be centrally located in town, but also that in emergencies requiring police to race off their property, it is safer for that to occur onto a large thoroughfare such as Bloomfield Avenue, rather than Park Street or North Fullerton Avenue.

"The best scenario is for them to stay on Bloomfield Avenue," added Schlager, but Spiller noted that while he does not discount that concern, he has not heard any input from MPD representatives as to whether or not moving to Claremont Avenue would be feasible from their perspective.

According to Spiller, the township could consider "moving" into the PNC drive-through bank property west of the Municipal Building, thus expanding the tract of land to include both properties. Baskerville, and Schlager also mentioned this option.

"As a body, I don't believe there have been discussions on our end about that," said Spiller this past Monday. "I believe that the same architects and developers that have done mockup drawings may have had preliminary discussions with the bank about something like that working, but that has not been on [the council's] end."

The following evening, DeSalvo, Township Planner Janice Talley and township design consultant Ira Smith attended an executive session with the council to discuss all options.

Before the meeting, Talley told The Montclair Times that she was aware the purchase of the PNC property had been discussed, but to her knowledge, PNC representatives have not been involved.

She noted that the fiscal feasibility of rebuilding on township property without the added revenues Benecke had outlined still needs to be examined.

As it stands, DeSalvo's two alternatives seem to be true. If not at Lackawanna, then the Municipal Building and police HQ will either be built on the same lot on Claremont Ave., with a possible extension into the PNC bank property, or both buildings will be rebuilt on their current sites.

Stolar declined to comment to The Montclair Times as to whether he had ruled out placing a municipal facility on the Lackawanna Plaza property, saying it would be inappropriate.

The township does not have to accept whatever plans the developers propose, according to Spiller.

"With any type of redevelopment project at Lackawanna Plaza, there is some amount of leverage we can put forward to try to have the municipal complex there," Spiller noted. "My understanding, it's not totally Stolar's decision as to whether or not it would go there ... That's a discussion we all need to have as a council."

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