



Arsenal Yards developers approved for hotel construction

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The Watertown Planning Board unanimously approved a modification to the Arsenal Yards mixed-use development, allowing for a 150-room Hampton Inn and Suites hotel, at its meeting Wednesday night. The hotel is currently slated to open in spring 2019.

Originally, the developers for Arsenal Yards planned to build a 79-unit apartment building instead of a hotel on what is now a parking lot abutting Arsenal Street. Now, with the hotel planned, the overall Arsenal Yards project will total 424 residences in addition to retail spaces and entertainment venues.

The Planning Board approved the site plan for the hotel with several conditions. Because developers are still making changes to the hotel's design, one condition of the approval assured that the town and its consultant will review the final design.

From apartments to a hotel

Construction on the hotel will begin in the fall, making it the first new building in the complex, according to Boylston Properties Project Manager Jeff Heidelberg. He said that the developers are pleased that the Planning Board approved the site plan.

"We are very happy with the outcome, and glad that we got some positive feedback from the public and the board," Heidelberg told the TAB.

Heidelberg explained that a hotel will make the Arsenal Yards project more desirable for all tenants, and he said the success of the nearby Residence Inn demonstrates a demand for hotels in the town.

“We have apartments already planned for the site,” Heidelberg said at the meeting. “Adding another use to the mix is extremely helpful.”

Manageable traffic, official says

Watertown Senior Planner Gideon Schreiber presented a staff report by the Department of Community Development and Planning, which recommended that the board conditionally approve the site plan for the hotel project.

Schreiber noted that the hotel will generate more car trips than an apartment building, but the increase is relatively small. The developers have already committed to making traffic improvements as mitigation for the project, and the traffic increase is still within the bounds of that mitigation, according to Schreiber.

Also, developers presented final plans for a two-way bicycle path connecting the Watertown-Cambridge Greenway to Arsenal Park.

Several board members were receptive to the hotel proposal. Board Chairman John Hawes argued that a hotel will not harm the residential area because the entire complex is mixed-use. Likewise, board member Janet Buck pointed out that Arsenal Street was not initially a residential road.

“Arsenal Street has always been a major commercial corridor,” Buck said. “The idea that we are ruining a residential neighborhood, I think, is really not accurate.”

Residents voice support

Several Watertown residents at the meeting agreed that a hotel could benefit the community, though some were initially skeptical about the loss of housing. John Labadini, president of the Concerned Watertown Homeowners’ Association, spoke out in favor of the proposed hotel.

“This change ... benefits the economy of Watertown, it benefits commerce in Watertown, it benefits the taxpayers, it keeps our taxes from going up, and I think we should embrace it,” Labadini said.

Town Councilor Angie Kounelis, who represents the East End of Watertown, said the conversion of one of the buildings from residential to hotel is a relatively minor change. However, Kounelis has larger concerns about the development, which she warned will bring increased traffic and only has one means of egress. As a result, she said that the area’s infrastructure will need to be improved.

“We as a community need to work towards what’s going to best for the area in the long run,” Kounelis told the TAB. “There’s no reversing it at this point, and the community will bear the burden.”

Building design

In addition to changing the building’s use, the developers have redesigned the building several times over the past few months, responding to suggestions from the town. Board members indicated that the latest design is an improvement over past concepts. However some board members said parts of the design are still excessive.

“I think we would still like to see the material palate [and] color palate toned down,” Buck said.

At the meeting, developers said they are still open to further changes, but they hope to keep the building’s design aesthetically interesting and not make it too plain. They rejected a suggestion to use red brick walls like other buildings in the area, for both aesthetic and structural reasons.

Local resident Olivia Thomas, on the other hand, said she wants the building to be distinctive, and argued that developers have toned down the design too much.

“This new design seems like you’re just bringing it down,” Thomas said. “I wish you’d bring it up as the first building, and put some edge into it.”

Town Council President Mark Sideris affirmed his support for the project, and said the developers have listened to the community's concerns. He argued that the presence of a hotel will be beneficial.

"I think that this will be another key to making this a very successful project," Sideris said.

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