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New Brunswick OKs Gateway-area step

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NEW BRUNSWICK: The city Planning Board last night unanimously recommended that the Somerset Street-Easton Avenue area be declared in need of redevelopment, a step that will further the \$127 million Gateway Center project.

"It's an important location with potential near

major uses such as Robert Wood Johnson (University Hospital) and Rutgers (University)," said Glenn Patterson, city director of planning and economic development. "We should capitalize on that potential."

But some area business owners and residents did not support the proposal.

In March, officials from

New Brunswick, Rutgers University and the New Brunswick Development Corp. announced plans for a 330-foot tower and transit hub that would house 200 condominium units, a 565-space parking deck, office space and the Rutgers University Bookstore.

The city has been named a "transit village" in a state program that encour-

ages transit-centered development, and the building would provide easy access to transportation alternatives at a 1.5-acre site stretching from the New Brunswick train station to the intersection of Somerset Street and Easton Avenue.

Patterson characterized the area as substantially underdeveloped with a rut-

ted parking lot, truck trailers being used as part of a building, and stores covering up architectural features with illegal signs.

The Planning Board approval is limited to calling for the redevelopment designation by the City Council, Patterson said. Gateway or any other project

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was not being specifically considered by the board last night.

After a Planning Board recommendation, the City Council considers whether to approve the redevelopment designation.

But the proposed designation, and the Gateway project, have met with strong opposition from business and landowners in the proposed redevelopment area.

And historians opposed to parts of the Gateway project have criticized the 30-story tower, saying the project would destroy part of the city's rich architectural heritage.

Morris Kafka, vice president of the community-based New Brunswick Historical Society and the city's historical association, criticized the city's "push toward wholesale demolition" of what he said is the last intact 19th-century row of commercial structures in town.

"The city should focus on smart growth, which includes doing very careful, thorough research on history and on multiple alternatives," Kafka, a historic preservation consultant who specializes in New Brunswick structures, said yesterday afternoon by phone. "I do not feel that that's happening."

This approach to redevelop-

ment, he said, was to discount any input from historians. The most recent example, he said, was that he only became aware of the meeting yesterday when he received a call from a newspaper reporter seeking a comment on the Planning Board's possible action.

Clearly, downtown revitalization is necessary, Kafka said, and he favors parts of the Gateway project. But it must be sensitive to the surrounding area, which includes Rutgers' Old Queens Campus and St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church. Some buildings in that area date back more than 200 years to the Revolutionary War era and may have been the homes of important university or city figures, said Kafka.

"It's premature and inappropriate to have a vote . . . until they know what they have there," Kafka said. "There has not been anyone who is an expert on architectural history and on the city history who has done research or been able to present that research to this board."

He said trading in the city's history and cultural assets for another bland building without looking at ways to integrate existing architecture in a substantial way into the project would be shortsighted.

"We think about quality and identity in New Brunswick," he said.

Kafka was one of more than a

dozen people, some with their lawyers, attending last night's meeting.

Patterson, under questioning from Kafka, said that a historical review is not a requirement in determining an area in need of redevelopment. A more appropriate time for a historical review would be when and if a specific proposal is presented to the city, Patterson said.

The Gateway building would replace a stretch of buildings at 104-120 Somerset St., including the three-story brick building housing Neubies Restaurant, AllPage and Vagabond Tours and two converted residential structures containing E-Clips and First Class notes.

Edward Mueller is the owner of three buildings on Somerset Street at the foot of College Avenue and the independent college bookstore New Jersey Books at 104 Somerset St.

Mueller spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to renovate his properties in the late '90s, and they are as vital as ever with all his residential and commercial units rented, he said yesterday before the meeting.

"I have a successful business," said the Newark-based businessman who has another bookstore near the Rutgers-Newark campus. "They want to replace me."

Mueller's attorney, Saul Wolfe, questioned zoning changes made in the mid-1990s

that have limited his client's ability to improve his properties as he sees fit.

Patterson, when questioned by Wolfe, said that in his 16 years with the city he had found all the properties he had reviewed for possible redevelopment in need of redevelopment.

The proposed Gateway building would house a new Rutgers University bookstore run by an outside vendor, Mueller said.

If the Gateway plans come to fruition, Rutgers would occupy up to 65,000 square feet in the Gateway building, including a 35,000-square-foot space for the bookstore, a visitor's center, the Rutgers University Press and the Rutgers Club.

The redevelopment plan is part of a larger collaboration between the city and Rutgers that would include turning College Avenue into a pedestrian mall, building a university bus terminal and more classroom space at Rutgers College, and making over housing in nearby neighborhoods.

The grease trucks' future, too, may be up in the air. The College Avenue parking lot where the trucks are located is being considered for an academic building, but university officials have said the purveyors of sandwiches and other foods will continue to have a place at Rutgers.

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