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Visions of a Rental Community on Witherspoon

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“It didn’t come across as ‘neighborhood,’” said one resident. “It came across as ‘Courtyard Marriott hotel.’”

This was the sentiment Saturday morning among some of those attending Princeton Future’s meeting on plans to build a mid-rise residential community at the site of the old University Medical Center at Princeton on Witherspoon Street.

Ron Ladell, senior vice president of the development company AvalonBay, laid out the plan to demolish the old hospital and erect rental apartments, ranging in size from studios to 1 to 3 bedroom units. The parking garage will be preserved.



“My number one theme,” said Ladell in his presentation, “is to change as little as possible from the master plan.” That zoning plan, as explained at the meeting by borough council president Kevin Wilkes, offered opportunities for the

land to be used for residential housing, of which 56 (20%) of 280 units must be affordable housing, as well as retail, open space, community facilities, and parking.

Ladell’s AvalonBay plan creates a residential setting of 324 units, up from the

suggested 280. In order to stay within the square-footage of property, Avalon Princeton's apartments will be smaller than originally envisioned, with rents running from about \$1,600 per month for a 500-600 ft² studio to \$3,200 for a 1000+ ft² three-bedroom apartment. The buildings of brick, brownstone and masonry will be 4-5 stories high.

Many residents were skeptical about aspects of the Avalon Princeton proposal. While most agreed that the hospital building should be rid of asbestos and demolished as soon as the hospital moves in May, concerns were raised about whether the new housing would serve the community's interests.

Many people said the purely residential plan would not be inclusive to those already living near it, thus the buildings appeared to be less "neighborhood"-like and more "luxury hotel"-like. Members of Sustainable Princeton were among the residents in the audience who encouraged Ladell to consider taking advantage of the mixed-use opportunity in the ordinance to add a retail component or make community spaces, offices, and meeting rooms in order to integrate the community into the project.

However, Ladell said he felt creating retail space would compete with the already struggling Witherspoon street retail area. "We want to be a catalyst for revitalizing the retail on Witherspoon," said Ladell, by bringing in hundreds of new residents who would utilize the Witherspoon shops. He also claimed that office space would increase rush-hour traffic, whereas the residential plan would significantly decrease the constant traffic the old hospital created.

Another concern was that the school system might not be able to accommodate the increase in school-aged children whose families would move into Avalon Princeton.

Dorothy Bedford, chair of the Facilities Committee of the School Board, was in the audience, and responded: "I'd like to assure you that our elementary schools are well-under capacity," she said. "We actually have empty classrooms in some of our buildings and are well able to accommodate the 5th grade and under crowd." She added that the middle schools and high schools are closer to capacity, but that there are still empty seats.

Ladell also said that the under-served market he was targeting with the development plan is comprised of "empty nesters," or adults living without children, Millennials, and young families with toddlers, not necessarily those with lots of school-aged children.

Questions of affordability arose. The Avalon plan includes 56 affordable units,

but since the number of total units increased from 280 to 324, this means only 17.3% of the apartments will be affordable housing, and Ladell will have to seek rezoning approval to change the Princeton ordinance's 20% mandate.

Ladell commented that COAH (the Council on Affordable Housing)'s mandate on rentals is only 15% (housing for sale is 20%), thus they are exceeding the demand with Avalon Princeton. Residents replied that Princeton already lacks affordable housing and thus the 20% is required to make up for a current dearth. Many also said that \$1,600 for a studio of 500 to 600 square feet seemed rather expensive for a working class individual.

The benefits of the Avalon Princeton project, according to Ladell, include increased tax revenue, as the hospital did not pay taxes, increased jobs during construction, decreased 24-hour traffic from the emergency vehicles and out-of-town clients, and potentially increased land values.

Ladell does not know exactly when the project can be completed, but he is eager to begin work once they can be certain of approval, and once the hospital makes its official move on May 22, 2012. He said the entire construction process -- after a 4-5 month project of asbestos removal and demolition of the old hospital -- could take up to 2 years.

About the Author »



Vivienne Chen

Vivienne Chen is a student at Princeton University majoring in English. She recently moved to Princeton from Pleasanton, California.

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