

A \$30 million retail complex with 200 jobs for Pittsfield?

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PITTSFIELD -- A Needham-based developer has made a second pitch to put a retail center in the William Stanley Business Park, a \$30 million complex that would be slightly bigger than what had been proposed originally.

Waterstone Retail Development has proposed the construction of a 200,000-square-foot building occupied by a single tenant that it says would bring 200 mostly full-time jobs to Pittsfield, create 350 construction positions over a two-year period, and bring \$300,000 in tax revenue to the city.

The complex would be located on the same area that Waterstone proposed the first time: A 16-acre parcel commonly referred to as "the teens." The parcel borders Woodlawn Avenue and Tyler Street. Waterstone has developed 37 shopping centers across the country.

It would cost \$10 million -- a third of the project's total price tag -- just to prepare the area for a retail complex, said Doug Richardson, Waterstone's vice president of development. Numerous concrete foundations and slabs, remnants of General Electric Co.'s factories, would have to be removed. The land would be capped to prevent remaining underground contaminants from interfering with the above ground construction.

Waterstone's first proposal, announced in December 2011, called for the creation of a 170,000-square-foot multi-tenant shopping center at the Stanley Business Park that could bring 150 jobs to the city.

At the time the first proposal was announced, Waterstone had already signed a letter of intent with the city and was negotiating a lease with the Pittsfield Economic Development Authority, the quasi-public agency charged with the 52-acre business park's development. The business park is on land once occupied by GE factories.

On Thursday, Waterstone Principal Neal Shalom said that the original letter of intent expired "quite a while ago." He said Waterstone has been working with local people since that agreement ended, but that the company currently has no plans filed with the city.

"We're working in good faith with PEDDA and the city," said Waterstone Principal Anton Melchionda.

If the proposal does go forward, the next step would be for Waterstone to file plans with the Community Development Board, said PEDDA's Executive Director Cory Thurston.

Mayor Daniel L. Bianchi, who is also a PEDDA Board member, has said he would prefer the development of the Stanley Business Park to be limited to industrial concerns. He invited Waterstone to discuss its revamped proposal with PEDDA because only one of the current's board 11 members was also on the board in December 2011.

"I am still committed personally to a manufacturing operation over there," Bianchi said following Waterstone's presentation. "But I had heard some numbers about what it might take to get the land to be developed.

"That's what I wanted the board to hear as well," Bianchi said, referring to the \$10 million figure. "I was kind of interested in what they had to say in regards to that."

Shalom said Waterstone's first proposal, which was announced to great fanfare, fell through when the proposed anchor tenant halted its national expansion plans due to the economy. After conducting extensive research on the amount of available industrial land in certain areas of the Berkshires this time around, Shalom said Waterstone has concluded that the teens parcel is best suited for retail.

"We'd be happy to do manufacturing or warehousing, we actually do more of that than we do retail," said Shalom. "But we've determined the highest and best use, in our opinion, is a retail development on the site.

"People are interested in seeing manufacturing and that would be great here," he continued. "But there's not a lot of manufacturing companies locating in this part of the country, and there's a lot of competing empty buildings available that have a low cost of entry."

Richardson said there are 10 sites in Pittsfield alone that would be "quicker and cheaper" for industrial firms to develop than the teens parcel.

The project would also include the construction of a new parking area, new signal and turn lights at the intersection of Dalton Avenue and Tyler Street, new sidewalks and walkways on both sides of the roadways, two new public transit stops, and the possibility of extensive landscaping improvements.

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