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A Public Process

LelandAlliance + Duany Plater-Zyberk's master plan for Hudson River city's waterfront redevelopment project starts with a charrette

By Keat Foong, Executive Editor

JULY 02, 2007 -- Newburgh, N.Y.--Developers are only too familiar with their plans meeting strenuous objections from town residents. But at the final charrette presentation given by Andres Duany, founding principal of Duany Plater-Zyberk and Co. (DPZ), Miami, attendees rose to their feet and gave a standing ovation for the plan that was on the boards. "You do not get that too often," comments Jean-Ann McGrane, city manager. "We are ready to embrace this world-class vision."



This is a ringing endorsement for the developer LeylandAlliance LLC and architect and town planner DPZ's master plan thus far to redevelop a vacant 30-acre waterfront site in Newburgh, N.Y. into a mixed-use pedestrian-oriented neighborhood. The project is an important component of the renaissance of Newburgh, a picturesque historic city sitting on the banks of the Hudson River.

Following the charrette, the master plan for the city-owned site, which sits on sloping land on the Hudson River waterfront, calls for 511 residential units (with 475 additional units off-site), 1,407 parking spaces, as well as several riverside parks. Office buildings, a hotel, an amphitheater, a fish market, fishing piers and a rapid transit terminus are also in the plan, as well as plazas, a boardwalk and tree-lined waterfront promenade.

The total development cost for the project, a public-private partnership, has not been finalized. Leyland, which will purchase the site, is in the process of signing a development agreement with the city.

Leyland's redevelopment project in Newburgh is a part of the city of Newburgh's overall objectives to establish itself as a gateway to the Hudson Valley and a regional destination. After all, the city—about an hour by the Metro-North commuter train from New York City—has breathtaking views of the Hudson Valley, a storied past peopled by the Hudson River School of painters, and it is said to be the second-largest historic district in the nation after New York City's Upper East Side.

In recent years, Newburgh has been in transition, with development interest spilling over into the region from the real estate markets of New York City and elsewhere, and an influx of residents and artists. In fact, Newburgh is located in Orange County, the fastest-growing county in New York state. Signs of revitalization include the new, bustling waterfront restaurants; the resumption of a Newburgh-Beacon ferry; the strengthening of the Stewart/Newburgh airport; and a new avant-garde museum in nearby Beacon across the river.

The redevelopment site consists of two separate pieces of land: a 23-acre site that was demolished under the urban renewal program of the '60s/'70s and never redeveloped, and a seven-acre environmentally contaminated EPA superfund site, previously foreclosed on by the city. One of the goals of the redevelopment is also to "connect" the city's downtown to the waterfront via this portion of the city. "We felt this was good timing for the city of Newburgh to get competitive proposals for the site," says City Manager McGrane.

The city put out an RFQ as opposed to a RFP because "we were not looking for a developer with set plans," says Robert McKenna, city of Newburgh director of planning and development. "We were seeking a partner to develop a plan with the city and community." In the RFQ, the city indicated it wanted a mixed-use development and left open what was to be on the site. Leyland was eventually selected in 2006 from 19 regional and national developers that responded to the RFQ, after a process that included a public presentation, recommendations and field visits to sample projects. The criteria for selecting the winning bid, says McKenna, was the team's

qualifications, its ability to be a good partner and its commitment to a public planning process.

The Tuxedo, N.Y.-based Leyland, founded in 1984 by its president, Steve Maun, is committed to New Urbanism principles and has come to focus exclusively on the creation of Traditional Neighborhood Development communities. Leyland is currently engaged in New Urbanist projects in Norfolk, Va.; North Augusta, S.C.; Mansfield, Conn.; Warwick, N.Y. and Madison, Conn.—four of them public-private partnerships. The company, which is working with DPZ on other projects, chose DPZ for the Newburgh project in part for DPZ's broader perspective, especially since the city wanted to link the waterfront to the city, says President Maun. "We knew we needed a planner and designer that would think about the larger context and look outside of the 30 acres."

LelandAlliance, which was not the only bidder to suggest a public charrette process, was the winning bid partly because of its working relationship with DPZ, "one of the world leaders" in the New Urbanist "vision," says McKenna. "This team clearly shared our vision for what the new city environment or neighborhood could look like. We spoke the same language. We are not just building housing; the firm comes from a strong background of building communities."

One of the team's proposals to the city was a charrette. Very frequently, developers draw their initial plans in private and then approach the public for input. A charrette, on the other hand, involves real-time participation by the public in the creation of a set of finished documents. Comments from the public are incorporated into the drafts as they are put forward. Occasional presentations consolidate the design options and explain which suggestions were incorporated, and the reasons. The goal is to arrive at a master plan that is embraced by as many as possible. The entire development team, from the designers to the engineers to the marketing consultants, are onsite during the charrette. The team can provide and obtain immediate feedback from the public, thus avoiding delays.

Maun explained that a charrette can work wonders in ultimately making the project possible. "The beauty of a charrette process is that although it costs more, it also yields public approval at an early date so that when you are permitting, you already have the public on your side. It tends to accelerate the time frame of approval process and the project itself." And from the architect's point of view, one of the benefits of the charrette is that it allows DPZ to obtain genuinely fresh ideas, says Duany.

Many developers, acknowledges Maun, may be wary of the public process. "The designs are developed in the quiet of the architect's office. Then, they go to the public and say, 'Here it is.' But that is the first time the public has seen it. They are suspicious because they have never seen it before." In fact, McGrane, the city manager, says that the city had tried and failed several times before to implement such "private" plans. "There was not sufficient public buy-in to the plans and they did not go anywhere," she says.

A transparent process

In the Newburgh project's case, the charrette, led by Duany and DPZ Director of Town Planning Mike Watkins, took place in one week early this year. Leyland created an office out of a waterfront art gallery. The development team of about 40 consultants descended on the space, which was also open to walk-in members of the public. On the first day, DPZ provided an opening presentation. On the fourth day, Duany gave a pin-up design presentation at a community meeting hall of three options that had come out of the public meetings thus far. And on the seventh day, after more charrettes, the final charrette closing presentation was given by Duany.

Of course, not all of the wishes expressed in the charrette can be incorporated. In the question-and-answer period during the design review, an audience member expressed concern that the new buildings not obstruct the prime Hudson Valley views from her home. "I don't want my view blocked. I can tell you that right now," she says. Duany replied that because the land slopes down, and there is a distance to the new buildings, that was unlikely to happen. Not skipping a beat, he nevertheless argued that the design process is a democratic one and will have to take into account "what's best for the community as a whole, not one individual."

According to Watkins, the wishes that the audience conveyed during the charrette include "feathering" of the new to the existing neighborhood; public access to the waterfront; a painter's park that preserves the artist's view; control of the speed and volume of traffic on the offsite Broadway, Newburgh's major thoroughfare; and that businesses brought in by the new retail space not compete with, but complement, existing businesses in town.

At this point, DPZ has drawn up a master plan containing the configuration of the public spaces; design of the buildings, which will be created by a number of different architects brought in by DPZ; and uses that go into the buildings. One of the major goals of DPZ's master plan in Newburgh, says Watkins, was "balancing the city in

terms of housing, office, retail and civic uses." Additionally, the city needs a mix of income groups, and in Newburgh's case, that means attracting higher-income earners to condominiums, which will also boost the city's tax base. "You cannot have a community of nothing but affordable housing. You need someone to pay for it," Watkins adds.

The design features that came directly out of the charrette include a series of squares located at points along wide, concrete-dominated Broadway. This idea received considerable support from the charrette audience, notes Watkins. Different retail and residential uses will cluster around each square, which will also act to slow traffic. Watkins says DPZ paid attention to the width of streets; placed buildings in a similar relationship; provided for parking on the street or behind buildings; and made sure the proportions and construction techniques of the buildings were similar to those of existing buildings. Most residents preferred that the new buildings be in traditional style. DPZ has drawn up one plan incorporating more traditional styles and another for modern-style architecture.

Maun notes that one lesson so far is the importance of the pre-charrette preparation, which preceded the charrette by about six months. During this time, LelandAlliance found out who the various community groups and interested parties were and met with them. "You can hold the charrette, but if you do not do your homework, some people may show up and some not. You do not have the input you want," says Maun. The developer also has to be aware of the site's environmental conditions—traffic, sewage systems, the engineering work needed—ahead of time. "It is important to understand all these issues before the charrette begins. If you do your homework, when the team comes to town, you are informed about what the issues will be."

The master plan for the 30 acres is still subject to planning commission board approval and zoning changes. It also has to undergo state environmental impact review of its effects on traffic, water, air quality, and the economic and social environment. The developer's sale contract is expected to be signed next year with the city. "I've been in numerous community planning processes. This is the most extensive community involvement process I have ever seen and participated in," says McGrane. The project, she concludes, will "absolutely" be more likely to get approved.

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