

# Town Board presented revised plans for large Main Street apartment complex



*Rendering of 203-2-13 East Main St. prepared by architects EDI International on behalf of developer Robert Muchnick.*

By **Alek Lewis**

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Revised plans for a large mixed-use apartment complex at the former Sears site on East Main Street were presented to the Riverhead Town Board on Thursday, nearly six years after the original development plans were first aired in Town Hall.

The five-story, mixed use building at 203-213 East Main Street, proposed by applicant Robert Muchnick, owner of Metro Group Properties of Long Island, has “changed significantly in design, massing, materials, and layout” since the project was last discussed publicly, according to planners. The new site plan, dated Sept. 27, 2022, includes a total of 165 apartments — 52 studio units, 8- one-bedroom units and 33 two-bedroom units — a reduction of five units from the developer’s original proposal, according to a planning department staff report presented on Thursday.

If the project is approved by the town, it would be the largest apartment building in the town yet, dwarfing the 116-unit Riverview Lofts, which currently holds that record and sits adjacent to the site of the proposed development. The developer did not specify during the meeting whether the project’s apartments would be market rate or be workforce housing with prices subject to income limits, like Riverview Lofts.



*Architect's rendering of the north side of the building, facing East Main Street. Image: EDI International.*

The proposal also includes a combined 5,828-square-feet of commercial leasing and lobby space along East Main Street, as well as 2,082-square-feet of amenity space on the south side of the building.

The building has also made changes to reflect recommendations outlined in the Pattern Book, a design guide for downtown development made with community input. This includes setbacks to the fourth and fifth floors, a recommendation made by the Pattern Book to minimize visual impacts of larger buildings. The Pattern Book has been adopted by the Town Board, but has yet to be codified in the town's zoning laws. The resolution previously introduced to consider the adoption of planning requirements

outlined in the Pattern Book exempted several projects with applications already pending, including Metro Group's project.

It is also unknown whether the building's facade will be influenced by the pattern book, according to the staff report. Town Board members reacted positively to the design renderings presented to them.

Community Development Director Dawn Thomas said the developers have been working with her department and Urban Design Associates, the consulting firm which produced the pattern book and is consulting on other projects downtown, and was "very receptive to everything that was suggested" by the town.

There would be a total of 155 parking stalls on the property — 86 stalls in a partially below grade parking garage and 69 stalls on ground level — almost double the 88 originally planned. The building is within the parking district and is not required to provide on-site parking; the project would need to provide 271 parking stalls if it were not in the district, according to the staff report.

One of the changes to the prior site plan is a 26-foot wide fire access road on the west side of the building from East Main Street to a parking lot along Heidi Behr Way.

The site has been vacant since its prior owner **demolished the former Sears building** and three smaller buildings to the east of the Sears building in 2016.

Due to the “significant changes to the scope of the project,” the planning department recommended the Town Board send out another round of coordinated review materials to the involved town, county and state agencies under the State Environmental Quality and Review Act.

“Now that I’m reviewing it, several hands have touched this before, I would feel more comfortable, on reviewing it from start to finish, that we make sure we follow these procedural guidelines,” planner Greg Bergman said. Bergman said in an interview after the meeting that if this recommendation was followed, the SEQRA process would start over again.

There are several “potentially significant environmental impacts” that need further study, the staff report states, including the capacity of the Riverhead water and sewer districts to serve the development, traffic impacts, **potential for damaging nearby buildings** from construction activity, storm and flooding resiliency, effects on enrollment of children in the Riverhead Central School District and demand for public safety services.

The Town Board declared the project a Type I action under SEQRA and determined the project would have a significant environmental impact, issuing a “positive declaration,” in May 2018. Scoping sessions were held for the draft environmental impact statement, required for actions with a positive declaration, and the draft was submitted in September 2019. Bergman said in an interview after

the meeting that the DEIS was deemed inadequate for public review and required revision.

Bergman said he did not personally review the rejected DEIS, but emergency access was a concern for the project.

John Wagner, the attorney for the applicant, objected to the idea of restarting the SEQRA process.

“The purpose of the coordinated review is initially — it happens very early in the process — the purpose is to basically determine who the lead agency is going to be when you have coordinated review,” Wagner said. “And that process was completed here and lead agency is of course the Town Board. And the lead agency has actually gone beyond that initial step, and has made a determination of significance, which is the positive declaration that was issued back in 2018.”

He said the application has “advanced” past that point and is in the draft environmental impact statement process and that after a draft is accepted it would be circulated to all the involved agencies. He said nothing in SEQRA regulations calls for initiating coordinated review a second time.

“If we were to do that, we’d be running afoul of the rules and that could create legal problems down the road. I don’t think we might go down that road,” Wagner said.

Other town officials supported that view. “Not to go against our planning department, but I don’t know why we have to go backwards to go forward,” Council Member Bob Kern said.

Building and Planning Administrator Jefferson Murphree said plans for the development have not been out in public for years and, with the exception of Council Member Tim Hubbard, board members have not seen the project.

“This is the largest project in the history of the downtown area. We want to make sure that the public has full vision and transparency of all the documentation, not only the public, but also all the other involved agencies and folks that are going to be reviewing this project,” Murphree said.

“This project has changed. We have spoken with Jeff Seeman [the town’s environmental consultant] about this. He shares Greg and my concern about trying to shorten the length of the review process. We understand what the applicant has said, we would like to reserve our recommendation to you until we’ve had the opportunity to speak with counsel in house first, before we make a formal recommendation to you,” he said.

“But it’s been four years since we last picked this up and it’s not like it was just a few months ago. It’s been a significant amount of time that has transpired,” Murphree said. “So we asked you not to make a decision on this today and then give us time to work with

the applicant on, and Jeff Seeman on going forward with the SEQRA review process.”

Board members agreed and said a determination for whether the project would restart the SEQRA review process will be made in about a week.

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