

The Record

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Builder bails out of project

Tuesday, December 4, 2007

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EMERSON -- The borough's chosen redeveloper has dropped out of a project to remake the downtown -- just before today's deadline to sign an agreement.

The deal with Atkins Cos. would have mandated mixed-use property in the northern end of the redevelopment zone alongside residential buildings to the south.

The borough tried to lock the company into the agreement after Atkins officials expressed doubts about their ability to acquire properties in the northern end and said they wanted to start with residential units in the south, Mayor Louis Lamatina said.

The company's withdrawal on Friday calls into question the number of residential units a profitable redevelopment plan would require, and whether officials and residents can stomach the density.

"What we learned from this process is that what's in the plan is not enough [residential] density to get it built," Lamatina said.

Atkins told the mayor and other officials last month that to make a profit, the company would need to build about 175 units in the southern end of the redevelopment zone instead of the approximately 50 they originally proposed.

Two other bidders

Atkins' low-density plan was one of the major reasons the council voted for the small company over two other bidders, who proposed about twice as many residential units. Now, borough officials are contacting those developers.

Lamatina said he and the borough administrator met with Bryan Hekemian of Hackensack-based Hekemian & Co. on Monday.

The borough will also contact bidder Millennium Homes Inc.

Atkins officials said a difference in philosophy was to blame.

"We put a lot of time and effort and money in, and came ultimately to see that we and the borough saw the way to get things done differently," Atkins official Scott Fishbone said.

Borough officials said the developer was dragging its feet.

"We were going nowhere fast with Atkins," he said. "You have to give people adequate time to show whether they can perform or not. Atkins was given significant time and they were not able to perform."

Councilwoman Marcia DeSalvo said the borough would look to its planner, Joseph Burgis, to set a realistic number for residential housing.

"We're kind of looking for him to direct us with what's reasonable," she said. "We don't want too much [residential] density, but we know we will have to give a developer some amount of density to get the project developed."