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After years of delay, developer ready to proceed with East Lyme project

By [Kimberly Drelich](#) Day Staff Writer

East Lyme - The long-stalled Gateway Commons development proposed for 200 acres near Flanders Road and Interstate 95 appears to be moving forward after a five-year delay.

Developers plan to build 275 residential rental units as the initial phase, with construction slated to begin in 2014.

In 2008, the town approved a master plan for both commercial and residential components on land near highway exits 73 and 74. The proposal entailed road safety and traffic improvements, such as reconfiguring the southbound Exit 74 ramps.

But the project stalled during the economic downturn as did many other large-scale developments in the region.

The developers planned on installing the commercial component first, but the residential market appears to have rebounded before the commercial, said First Selectman Paul Formica.

"The demand for new high-quality multifamily rental communities is on the rise locally, regionally and across the nation," wrote Newton C. Brainard, vice president of Simon Konover Development Corporation in an emailed statement. "Our new community is designed to appeal to this growing sector of the residential market." Originally, the developers had ideas for apartments and townhouse units, likely to be owner-occupied.

Konover of West Hartford and KGI Properties of Providence, R.I. received approval from the zoning commission for the conceptual site plan and master development plan after a series of public hearings in 2008 and then got final site plan approval for the residential phase last month, said Zoning Official William Mulholland.

Brainard said in the statement that "planning continues for the retail phase of the development, which will be located adjacent to exit 74 off Interstate 95."

"Gateway Commons has been a focus of the Simon Konover/KGI team for nearly a decade and they remain committed to creating an exceptional development that enhances East Lyme and the surrounding region," Brainard stated.

Plans show 10 residential buildings, two and three stories tall, with stone foundations and clapboard siding. Each building would have two parking garages, and there would be additional parking spaces, a pool and a clubhouse with a fitness center, showers, billiard room and an event space. The developers will set aside open space north of the residences. Construction would take about 16 to 18 months, according to Brainard.

Designed as a public-private partnership, Gateway Commons calls for the reconfiguration of the southbound exit 74 on and off ramps of Interstate 95 and safety improvements with funding from the state and developer. The developer and town have also discussed traffic improvements to Route 161 (Flanders Road).

For the residential component, developers plan to pave and add lighting to East Society Road, which runs parallel to the highway and connects to Dean Road, said Zoning Commission Chairman Marc Salerno. East Society Road will serve as the main access road for the residences slated to be constructed by 2016, but Route 161 can provide access for emergencies, according to the project's traffic impact study.

The Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments, which recommends the distribution of state Department of Transportation funds to projects in the region, voted the reconfiguration of the exits as its top regional priority in 2011, said Formica. The redesigned exits mirror the 2004 safety recommendations of the DOT's Interstate 95 Corridor Feasibility Study, according to Formica.

The application proposed building a potential access route through the development's property that would allow for a new southbound on- and off-ramp configuration with a lane to accelerate. The developer has indicated an interest in discussing a "road map" for the area with SCCOG, the DOT and the town.

State DOT spokesman Kevin Nursick said the DOT determined no highway infrastructure changes were needed because of the residences.

"The impact in terms of traffic is inconsequential," he said.

The DOT has no work currently planned for Exit 74, according to Nursick. But commercial development could require the developer to seek approval from the DOT for improvements.

Rocco Tricarico, a neighbor who favored holding a new zoning public hearing on the site plan, said he and his neighbors have some concerns about the project, such as building the residential components separately, rather than as a whole development with improvements to roadway traffic and safety.

"This was always a commercial project with a residential overlay that would complement the village," he said.

He wanted further public discussion of the residential development, which is now rentals. He said he was concerned the residences could add traffic to an already-congested Flanders Road, especially without the roadway improvements in place, and that the development would require additional resources from the town.

The town's regulations allow building the development in phases but stipulate that the public infrastructure for each phase be in place before the buildings can be occupied.

Since the site plan conforms to the approved conceptual plan, it automatically merits zoning commission approval and no public hearing was required, said Salerno.

The buildings are multi-storied because of the land's wetlands, according to zoning meeting minutes. The proposed residences are roughly in the same area as in the conceptual plan, but shifted slightly westward towards East Society Road to accommodate wetlands, said Salerno.

The town's Inland Wetlands Agency held continued public hearings this spring to consider items such as water flow to wetlands near the development and approved the application, according to the agency's meeting minutes.

The zoning commission had denied the developers' first proposal to build 475 residential units on the parcel. The developers then held public workshops with the community and returned with a proposal more appropriate for the site, explained Salerno. The new application reduced the number of units to 275 and offered open space to provide a buffer zone to neighboring residences.

Formica said he thinks the Gateway project has many benefits for the town, such as improving roads and allowing up to 425,000 square feet of new commercial development.

"This is the last real area of the town where we can handle that kind of growth," he said.

Formica said the residential component will increase the town's grand list. The entire project would bring in roughly \$2 million to the town - with relatively little additional costs in terms of resources, he said.

Recent changes to the town's aquifer protection map boundaries could affect how much of the Gateway parcel falls within those boundaries, he said. This could potentially open up an area outside of the boundaries for a large wholesale retailer to move there with proper infrastructure to protect the surrounding environment.

But the zoning board would analyze the specific proposal if the commercial phase comes before the town for site plan approval.

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