

Apartment complex and grocery store for the West Ward is recommended by Easton Planning Commission

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A rendering by Steven Glickman Architects of Easton shows what Dutchtown Commons in the city's West Ward

A revised proposal for a seven-story apartment complex with a grocery store and 39 apartment units in Easton's West Ward was recommended for approval by the Easton Planning Commission on Wednesday night.

The nearly decade-old plan for "Dutchtown Commons" proposed by Brooklyn native Louis "Ari" Schwartz, was back before the Planning Commission after being rejected by city zoners last year. The Easton Zoning Hearing Board still needs to give final approval. Its next meeting is Sept. 16.

Changes were made to the project to make it more appealing to Zoning Hearing Board members who last year expressed concern over parking, traffic and whether the size of the building was out of character for the neighborhood, said Dutchtown Commons architect Steven Glickman.

Changes include reducing the building by one story and installing a recessed loading dock on the west side of the property so that trucks can back in to make deliveries without blocking traffic on Northampton Street.

But Dutchtown Commons would still require variances for height and parking.

The building is proposed to be 82.5 feet tall, though zoning only permits 70 feet.

As for parking, the developer is proposing 49 spots inside the building spread between the second floor and a basement level underneath the market.

The project would combine seven parcels from 616-630 Northampton St., and another one at 627 Pine St.

Rent for the 39 units would be whatever the market rate is, Glickman said.

The name Dutchtown Commons is a nod to the original neighborhood on the 600 block of Northampton Street. The area is known as a “food desert,” where residents lack access to fresh fruits and vegetables. City officials and West Ward residents have long desired a grocery store in the neighborhood.

“We are very hopeful this will work and benefit the food desert that exists in the neighborhood,” Schwartz said.

Wednesday night’s presentation included a grocery store feasibility study conducted in May by Robert Gorland of Matthew P. Casey & Associates, Inc. of Harrisburg, and a traffic feasibility study.

The market study says the building would include a 13,713-square-foot commercial market, with 9,445 square feet set aside for retail sales. That area can accommodate several potential supermarket operators for a possible autumn 2022 opening, the study said.

Some proposed operators include Target, which has a small urban store on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia, or grocery stores like C-Town, Price Right Marketplace, Supremo, Bravo and Save-A-Lot, the study says.

A food cooperative, or co-op, which is a grocery store owned by private members who buy into a share of the business, isn’t recommended because it can take several years to attract enough members, and co-ops usually do best in middle- and upper-income neighborhoods rather than food deserts, the study says.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, about 16% of households in the area do not own a vehicle, the study says. Access to the proposed store would be supported by four LANTA bus routes that travel directly past the site with two additional routes that pass through the intersection of Sixth and Northampton streets.

The store would also accept SNAP benefits and have recommended hours of 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week.

“I think a grocery store in this particular location of town is important,” commission member Ronald Shipman said.

Planning Commission members Bill Carr, Jamie Kulick, Charles Elliott and Shipman recommended the project for approval Wednesday. Robert Sun, William Heilman and Bonnie Winfield were absent.

Once known as part of Dutchtown, the 600 block flourished with the rest of the city until the latter half of the last century, when investors either fled to the suburbs or receded into the core downtown. Buildings fell into disrepair, storefronts disappeared and family businesses labored to hang on.

During the last several years, the embattled block has started to see a resurgence as restaurants and other small businesses come into the West Ward.

Details of Dutchtown Commons

- It will be seven stories, not including a basement-level grocery store.
- It will include 39 apartments: 20 one-bedroom units ranging from 757 square feet to 1,153 square feet; six one-bedroom units with study ranging from 929 square feet to 1,106 square feet, and 13 two-bedroom units ranging from 1,389 square feet to 2,122 square feet.
- Estimated to cost \$18 million.
- Anticipated construction date of summer 2020.

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A Stroudsburg native, Christina Tatu came to The Morning Call in 2015. Before that, she worked at the Pocono Record and New Jersey Herald as a general beat reporter covering multiple municipalities and school districts. Now she writes about the City of Easton, Lower Nazareth and Nazareth Borough.