

New study to begin, but 'Knightland' plan is 'about to cross finish line,' lawyer says

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A tourist-oriented shopping attraction or neighborhood business?

That's one of the questions before the members of the Riverhead Town Planning Board as they review the site plan for "Knightland," a proposal by East Wind Caterers/Hotel owner Kenney Barra to develop 24 retail shops and a restaurant on the six-acre parcel at the intersection of Sound Avenue and Route 25A in Wading River.

Though the Riverhead Town Board recently decided to spend in excess of \$40,000 to study impacts of development along Route 25A in Wading River, the Planning Board continues to review site plan applications for projects in the study corridor because the Town Board has declined to impose a moratorium on commercial development in the corridor.

Barra's proposal was aired before the Planning Board this afternoon. He'd like to build 24 retail buildings ranging in size from 990 to 2,278 square feet — for a total of more than 38,000 square feet of retail space — on the six-acre triangular parcel at the 25A/Sound Avenue intersection.

He'd also like to expand the existing beverage distributor's building and convert it to an eatery, with restroom facilities for the entire shopping area. Barra, who at a November Planning Board meeting referred to the facility as a "food court" now says it's a restaurant. "Food court" is not a permitted use in the CR zoning use district, in which most of the subject property is located.

The Riverhead Neighborhood Preservation Coalition strenuously objects to the facility being re-cast as a restaurant.

"You can't just call [it] something and make it so," Dominique Mendez, Riverhead Neighborhood Preservation Coalition said after the meeting. "That's why I refer to this place sometimes as the land of make believe," she said. "They just proved it."

The size and configuration of what the developer has labeled a restaurant, and the fact that it has large toilet facilities designed to service the entire shopping area, make the proposed 4,928-square-foot restaurant a "food court" regardless of its label on drawings submitted by the applicant, Mendez said.

The RNPC, Wading River Civic Association and the Group for



the East End continue to press for a moratorium to halt review of applications like Barra's and others along the Route 25A corridor. A majority of the Riverhead Town Board has so far resisted that demand, even though a board majority has agreed to commission a corridor study to take a fresh look at the commercial zoning there.

Councilwoman Jodi Giglio does not support a new study. Studies have been done in the past and not fully implemented, she said. If they were implemented many of the concerns of local residents, such as traffic impacts, would be addressed, according to the councilwoman, who attended today's Planning Board meeting.

She said she sees Knightland as "an opportunity for "Mom and Pop shops to rent small spaces.

"The model is beautiful," Giglio said, referring to a scale model of the proposed development built by engineer Angelo Nicosia of Mount Sinai. "It is definitely an improvement over what we have there now," Giglio said.

Giglio said she supports "responsible development" of the existing commercially zoned parcels in the Route 25A corridor. Knightland "conforms to current zoning," Giglio said.

She said a Dowling College study showed the ramifications of preservation are high taxes. "Almost 50 percent of our land in Riverhead Town is preserved," Giglio said. "That's why our taxes are as high as they are," she said.

Riverhead attorney Peter Danowski, who represents Barra, said his client's project has been "in the works for several years." Knightland is "at the final stages, about to cross the finish line," Danowski said, noting the proposal has the support of the chambers of commerce of both Wading River-Shoreham and Riverhead. "It will increase the tax base," he said.

"This plan has so many issues in terms of zoning inconsistencies, traffic questions and community character impacts," said Jen Hartnagel of the Group for the East End. Riverhead Planning Board members "keep talking about the small details and completely gloss over the big issues," she said after the meeting today.

"The corridor should undergo a comprehensive environmental review," Hartnagel said. There are currently several commercial projects under consideration whose review "should not be segmented," Hartnagel said.

Barra said he was disappointed that Mendez and Hartnagel didn't look at his scale model.

"Look how beautiful it is," Barra said, stating "Knightwood Village" has "a New England Feel." Opponents, he said, "didn't even want to see it."

"It's irrelevant," Mendez said of the model. "It doesn't conform to the intent of the zoning and should not even be reviewed."

The Planning Board made no decision at the conclusion of today's meeting. It will continue to deliberate on the Knightland application.



Developer Kenn Barra, left, and environmental advocate Richard Amper in a heated exchange following a March 17 press conference about the future of commercial development in the Route 25 A corridor in Wading River. *RiverheadLCOAL photo by Denise Civiletti*