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Speedwell Ave. project rattling Morristown

Home, business owners fearing uncertain futures

**BY PAUL BONASERA
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY RECORD**

MORRISTOWN -- With the Speedwell Avenue redevelopment project forecast to begin roughly a year from now, area residents and merchants are worried about losing their homes and stores.

"This is very bad for a lot of people," said Eva Amecqueta, who lives above a store on Speedwell Avenue with her 17-year-old son, Steve. They have lived in the apartment for 14 years.

"I don't know where we can move," she said.

"It's very important for them to do something for people on low income," Amecqueta said, noting that she pays \$1,000 a month for rent plus utilities.

There are about 90 residents in the 12-acre redevelopment site that includes parts of Speedwell Avenue, Early Street and Clinton Place, Mayor Donald Cresitello said. The zone runs down the west side of Speedwell from Clinton to Flagler; on the east side of Speedwell from Spring Street to Flagler; on Early from Speedwell almost to Atno Avenue; and on the north side of Clinton Place.

For Laura Rotunno, 47, who lives in a one-room apartment in a multi-family home on Early Street, the worry includes whether she will find affordable housing near public transportation.

Rotunno, who doesn't drive, walks to her job at the Century 21 department store on Speedwell and The Green.

"I might have to move to the other side of town where there is no bus or train and have to walk a long way in snow and ice and the dark," she said.

Also upset was Blanca Arias, who lives on Speedwell with her 15-year-old son.

"I don't know where we're going to go," she said. "It's not easy to find a place."

A group of nine townhouse owners on Clinton Place have argued not to be included in the redevelopment project, but have so far failed to persuade town officials to exclude them.

"Our stance from the beginning is we don't want to lose our homes and don't believe our properties are vital to the success of the project," said D.J. Smith, president of the Clinton Place Townhouse Association.

There are about 36 people who live in the townhouse development, and they will legally fight to keep their properties if necessary, Smith said.

While the town has several redevelopment projects in the works, the Speedwell Avenue project is the largest and has the largest number of residents, Cresitello said.

The town is not responsible for relocating residents because there is no local, state or federal money in the project, the mayor said.

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This section of Speedwell Avenue at Early Street in Morristown is part of the redevelopment zone. Business owners and residents are afraid that they won't be able to find another home -- or another place for their store -- after the project begins about a year from now.

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This section of Clinton Place at Speedwell Avenue is part of Morristown's redevelopment zone. The Clinton Place Townhouse Association, consisting of residents of the townhouse development in the area, plans a legal battle if the town forces people out of their homes.

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This is a view of Speedwell Avenue looking toward Spring Street in Morristown. While the town has other redevelopment projects in the works, the Speedwell Avenue project is the largest and has the largest number of residents who would be affected.

Trammell Crow Residential of Morristown, the project's developer, has proposed building 700 to 800 apartments and condominiums, 50,000 to 75,000 square feet of commercial development and an underground parking garage. The buildings will be four to six stories.

"The development is primarily residential except for the first floor of Speedwell, which will be commercial," said Todd Murphy, Trammell Crow's vice president of development.

After having reviewed Trammell Crow's plans, Paul Phillips, the town's redevelopment planner, is expected to make his recommendations on the proposal to the town council in August, Cresitello said.

Twenty percent of the new residences will be affordable housing and some of the area's current residents probably will qualify under the Council on Affordable Housing criteria, Murphy said.

The developer is likely in some way to help residents relocate, Murphy said.

"We don't have specific things planned to help residents relocate, but something will be done to help them," he said.

Some of the pressure will be taken off residents since the development will be built in stages, Murphy said. Not everything will be demolished at one time, he explained. Work is expected to begin on the project in August 2008, Murphy said.

It's possible that residents will be able to move from an area waiting to be demolished into a new apartment or condominium in a completed section, he said.

While tenants may qualify financially for existing public housing, Morristown Housing Authority executive director Marion Sally said they would have to file a public housing application in advance to be considered.

In order to qualify for family housing, the family has to include a child under 18, Sally said. The waiting list is about two to three years, she said. The waiting list for senior citizen housing is about a year and a half, Sally noted.

The Housing Choice Voucher Program, formerly known as Section 8 housing, has been closed for three years because it has such a long waiting list. There's no reason to take more applications, Sally said.

"I'm not happy," said Luz Correa, owner of Variedades Lined, a Speedwell Avenue gift shop. She said she was especially upset in view of the fact that she agreed to a new five-year lease with Speedwell Associates.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Correa said, adding that she will have to look for a new place.

Mario Castillo, owner of Morristown Perfumes on Speedwell, said the project puts his business in jeopardy. He must find a new store location, but it's difficult for him to move out of Morristown because 90 percent of his customers are from town, he said.
