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# The Star-Ledger

## In Union, the dialogue resumes on downtown's future

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**BY JASON JETT**  
**Star-Ledger Staff**

The Union Township Planning Board will reconvene public comment on a downtown redevelopment study tonight with a special meeting at the municipal building.

"We had to stop the hearing two weeks ago because the public comment ran over," township spokeswoman Geri Durso said. "This is an extra meeting only to continue the dialogue on redevelopment in Union Center."

The board session begins at 7 p.m. resuming a hearing suspended because of lateness on Nov. 30. Presentations by a professional planner and redevelopment attorney hired by the township consumed the bulk of time that evening.

Tonight's session will consist only of questions and suggestions by residents, business operators and property owners, Durso said. It will be the fourth meeting in as many weeks on a study to revitalize Union Center conducted by The Metro Company of Jersey City.

Mayor Peter Capodice noted that during previous sessions business owners called for more stores to generate foot traffic and bring nightlife into downtown. But property owners told township officials they want things kept the same.

"Some say we need change, some say we don't," Capodice said, before adding, "Union Center is the heart of Union. That's why our duty is to make sure it's a vibrant, thriving downtown."

Longtime residents, meanwhile, have called for a return to Union Center's heyday when shoppers flocked to Stan Sommers and Maxine's clothing stores and dined in casual restaurants.

"We need less dollar stores and banks," Judy Amorosa of Clover Terrace told a township committee session on redevelopment last month. "We need anchor stores that are family oriented, not urban culture oriented. We need ice cream stores that families can go to and enjoy the center."

Other residents said the township should keep to the colonial theme adopted some 25 years ago in a redevelopment plan, charging major bank branches and a soon-to-open Super Stop & Shop have strayed from that aesthetic.

Traffic was a key concern of some residents wary that redevelopment will increase problems on already congested streets.

"You cannot move in this town from sun-up to sundown," said Robert Vreeland of Plane Street, who also called for additional police and detail to quality-of-life issues.

Demolition of downtown structures and replacing them with buildings which increase residential use was another concern. Residents also asked about property condemnation, the impact of a growing population on the school district and whether downtown condominiums are viable without a nearby train station.

Jennifer Credidio, the township's redevelopment counsel, said it is too early to say what shape redevelopment might take but stressed the township would use its eminent domain power to take private property through condemnation as a last resort.

She added state grant and loan programs can be used to supplement private development to revitalize Union Center at no significant cost to taxpayers.

Stuart Portney, a professional planner and president of The Metro Company, said studies show Union Center to be a robust market for high-end residential development, either condominiums or apartments, even without close proximity to Union Station.

He said jitneys could be used to bring people into the downtown from the train station and Kean University area, as well as the other neighborhoods of Union.

"Redevelopment will bring a new demographic to Union Center," he said. "What Union Center can be is an exciting mixed-use village, with street vibrancy, pedestrian traffic and new residents that keep it from being a ghost town after five in the evening."

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