

Mixed feelings in Uptown about condo borders plan

by Alexis Maislen
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The Community Development Commission (CDC) approved a plan to use tax increment financing (TIF) money to redevelop the Broadway/Lawrence TIF area at 4720-40 N. Broadway into a Borders Books and Music with 37 condominium units. The hearing took place Feb. 5.

This is the site of the former Goldblatt's Department Store, Plymouth Hotel and the Leland Hotel across the street at 1201-13 W. Leland Ave. The site is located in a designated historic district and the buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Plymouth Hotel was once the accommodation for Gloria Swanson and Charlie Chaplin when they were filming at Essanay Studios, 1345 W. Argyle St.

The developer for the Goldblatt's complex, Joseph H. Freed Associates, plans to build a Borders store with 37 1000-sq.-ft. condominium units, eight of which will be sold as affordable housing.

David Behlman, of the Landmark Preservation Council of Illinois, was disappointed with the hearing outcome. "This should not have been approved. TIF money should not be used to demolish a national historic building in a historic district. We are asking the developer to do a partial retention scheme to save one bay of the building on Broadway and Leland," Behlman said.

There are three incentives that the federal government offers developers to encourage adaptive reuse of historic buildings.

The first incentive is a federal income tax credit on all retail in the space. The second is a state tax assessment freeze on the condos for ten years. And the third is a preservation easement to the Landmark Preservation Council of Illinois, which would make them part owner of the building in matters of preservation and maintenance.

To qualify for the incentives the building must be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. All work on the structure must comply with the codes of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and be supervised by the agency.

Community activists from COURAJ (Community of Uptown Residents for Affordability and Justice) and Edgewater Uptown Greens were unhappy with the approval of the Freed plan but were mollified by the rehabilitation of the Leland Hotel into 99 units of SRO and 33 studio apartments.

"We need to fight for fairness in Uptown. A condo conversion will push seniors out," said Mary Byrnes, a senior citizen and resident of Uptown.

COURAJ continued to express concern for senior citizens and the 90 percent of low-income families with children who attend area public schools. They quoted statistics from a citywide referendum in which 76 percent of Chicago residents believe the city needs to use every means available to provide more low-cost housing.

"We must make sure the city comes through on the promises they have already made and ensure future developments meet our needs," said Paul Fehribach, of Edgewater Uptown Green.

Not all 48th ward constituents were dissatisfied with the Borders/Condominium projects. Many applaud Ald. Mary Ann Smith's (48th) plan to create an entertainment center in Uptown, restore ballroom dancing at the Aragon and bring more community "daily life" stores into the neighborhood such as Walgreens, a dry cleaners, and a shoe store.

At a press conference held by COURAJ before the CDC hearing on Tuesday, an Uptown resident spoke up in support of the Borders/condominium plan.

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