

Design plans for major development under review

By CHRIS KEEGAN / Sun Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, August 8, 2011 10:00 am

RICHMOND - The largest development in town history won't be built overnight, and it could be more than a decade before all 399 proposed housing units are built and occupied.

How Richmond Commons looks on paper is in the hands of the town's Planning Board, which is reviewing engineering designs for the mixed-use development.

Plans by Richmond Realty Associates LLC of Cranston, in the works for nearly a decade, call for 399 age-restricted housing units and 688,185 square feet of office and retail space built on 294 acres between 49 and 65 Kingstown Road (Route 138).

The project would be built in three phases. It won master plan, or conceptual approval, from the Planning Board in 2003.

A hearing on the development's preliminary plan is scheduled to continue Tuesday at Town Hall at 7 p.m.

"Most of the residential component as currently designed will take a very, very long time to develop," project attorney William Landry said at a July hearing attended by more than a dozen Kingstown Road residents. "No one's going to build 400 houses and wait for them to be filled up. It would be build as you go."

For a town with a \$4.25 million municipal budget, Richmond Commons could be a boon to the local tax base: An October 2008 fiscal impact study notes that the project could give the town as much as \$2.52 million in an annual net property taxes at full build-out. Public Works Director Scott Barber recently recommended that the development's roadways should be privately maintained - a move that would eliminate annual snowplowing expenses, at minimum.

The commons is also expected to be a major public water user, tapping a waterline extension that should be built by the fall of this year. (The extension, which is funded by federal grants and loans, will bring water to the Richmond Elementary School.)

On the housing side, 318 residential units would be built in duplexes, threeand four-unit buildings off a looped roadway system, creating distinct "pods" of housing for people age 55 and older.

"What we tried to do is make small, quiet, private mini-neighborhoods within each one of these distinct courts and terraces," said project engineer Roy Messier.

Another 81 apartment units would be built in three multistory structures near the site's retail area.

"This sprawl just really sets my teeth on edge," said Planning Board member Carolyn Richard, calling for a redesign last month.

"I just think this whole concept needs to be turned around," she added. "We need apartment buildings

with spacious apartments in them, [with] several stories so that it's compact. Then all of the sprawl is eliminated."

"This concept is just very passé," she added of the developer's plans. "It's an environmental terror."

On the retail side, 34 retail spaces are noted on site plans, including a 5,000 square foot restaurant. Three big box stores would offer 200,000, 120,000 and 78,000 square feet of storefront - though the largest store would not be built until the third phase of development. No major tenants have been announced.

The site's main retail area, built in the style of a New England village center, would house two rows of shops and second-floor offices with a central avenue between them.

More than 40 acres of land on the eastern side of the development would be donated to the town as open space and passive recreational use.

Outside the commons, Route 138 would be widened to accommodate new traffic, with dedicated lanes for left-hand turns at two main entrances: one next to Westerly Community Credit Union at 64 Kingstown Road; the other across from the Meadowbrook Road intersection. A third entrance would be located across from Meadow Brook golf course, near Richmond Elementary School.

Similar to Mashpee

At an earlier hearing, Landry said Richmond Commons is conceptually similar to Mashpee Commons - a regional prototype in Massachusetts for mixed-use commercial and retail development.

"There's a Super Stop & Shop there that provides an anchor that makes the other businesses successful," he noted. "The last thing we want is a bunch of unsuccessful smaller businesses that are not driven by the larger units."

Take the anchors away and you're left with a retail "nightmare," Landry said, referring to The Village at South County Commons in South Kingstown. (The mixed-use development, off Route 1, includes housing, small shops, a restaurant, a movie theater and a hotel, but lacks a large-scale retail anchor.)

"The leases can't be collateralized, the financing is a nightmare, the tenants come and go and they don't pay their rent," Landry said. "The only successful village-type commercial development has to have some type of largescale representation."

Planning Board member Nancy Hess said: "Make one of those big boxes [in Richmond Commons] a theater and you'd make a lot of people happy in town." Hess is a supervising planner for the state's Division of Planning.

She also called for more integration between the project's retail area and its housing units.

"At the farthest-most point, more than three-quarters of a mile away, no one in that residential area is going to walk down to the commercial development, and that's what you want them to do," Hess said. "Unless you have a walking trail system throughout the development that they can use, it's almost like

two halves."