
Proposed 165-unit apartment building draws criticism, questions and praise at public hearing



The Riverhead Town Board at its meeting of June 21. Photo: Alek Lewis

By **Alek Lewis**

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A public hearing on the site plan application and draft environmental impact statement for a proposed five-story mixed-use apartment building on East Main Street drew comments and questions about the project from speakers at the Riverhead Town Board's meeting last night.

Metro Group Properties and Heatherwood Luxury Rentals are proposing the construction of 165 market-rate rental apartments, with commercial, amenity, lobby and leasing space on the ground floor and 155 on-site parking spaces. The building would be built on a vacant 1.4-acre parcel located between the East End

Arts campus and the Riverview Lofts apartment building. The lot was previously occupied by a Sears retail store and three smaller retail shops. If built, the project would be the largest of its kind in the town.

Speakers at the hearing ranged from people just wanting to put in a good word for the project, to others who heavily critiqued the **draft environmental impact statement** (DEIS) prepared by the developer.



John Keane said the apartments will fill a need for young working people like his son. Photo: Alek Lewis

“I’m a father of two recent college graduates and I’d like to see them stay,” John Keane said. “With the cost of housing these days, people are getting chased off Long Island. And it’s great that kids and young professionals have the opportunity to stay. I love Riverhead, my kids love Riverhead, and I think this would be very good for the town.”

Several speakers spoke in support of the look of the building, which has been heavily revised since it was first presented to the town in 2017.

“I fully approve of this,” 9 Brother’s Building Supply owner Ida Palmieri said. “I think it’s absolutely a beautiful project and I think it will revitalize Main Street.”

“We did as much as we could to comply with the pattern book guidelines,” the applicant’s attorney, John Wagner said, referring to the design and zoning document for downtown Riverhead made with public input. Although the document was adopted by the Town Board in 2021, the recommendations of the document — including that buildings not be more than four stories/50 feet tall, down from the five stories/60 feet maximum in place now for the DC-1 zoning district — have not been codified.



John Wagner, attorney for applicant 203 Main LLC addresses the Town Board about the project.

MORE COVERAGE: [Town officials balk at moving away from pattern book recommendations](#)

The developer, throughout the years, was "...constantly refining and redesigning until we reached a product that everybody seems to be comfortable with, on the part of the town and the applicants," Wagner said.

There were several speakers critical of the development and the findings outlined in the DEIS. Heart of Riverhead Civic Association President Cindy Clifford said the building will put Main Street "in shadow," block the view of the Peconic River and increase traffic.

"I would argue that 165 apartments with 155 parking spaces would make it hard to say with a straight face that no significant traffic related impacts are anticipated, as stated in the DEIS," Clifford said.

"I take issue with the assumption this project should be exempt from parks and recreation fees," Clifford said. "I don't know if you had a chance to see that in the DEIS, But they noted town code 301 part four that there is a provision of a fee in lieu of providing public recreational space. Their argument made that none of the other apartment projects had to do so, but can't it be said that Summerwind, Peconic Crossing and the others were granted that exception because they were trailblazers? Shouldn't we be done with that now?"

Clifford and others also commented on the project's planned pursuit of tax benefits from the Riverhead Industrial Development Agency, which they said would have a negative impact on the town's tax base.



Cindy Clifford criticized and questioned statements in the applicants DEIS. Photo: Alek Lewis.

“The statement that the taxes from any development on the site will be a large improvement over the taxes from the current empty lot is also a superficial statement of the benefits to the town and I find it condescending,” Aquebogue resident Mark Haubner said. “Two references to town taxes offsetting the cost of the school district for the 12 students expected to live here are inconsistent with another statement in the DEIS, that these costs would be fully covered.”

“Taking \$240,000 out of the \$640,000 tax revenue for this building is substantial, and the real tax revenue becomes \$400,000 divided by 165 units — this is \$200 a month,” Haubner said. “This makes me wonder if our fire police, ambulance water and sewer infrastructure costs are covered at all.”

Haubner also noted that the size and position of the building would “increase the feeling of being in a canyon rather than an attractive historic town.” He also

criticized the proposal being designed to control storm water runoff from a three-inch rain event, rather than a six-inch rain event.

“Every inch of rain that we do not mitigate goes straight across the oil-stained asphalt parking lots and right into this Peconic River,” said Haubner, the co-chair of the town’s Environmental Advisory Committee and president of the North Fork Environmental Council.



Mark Haubner roundly criticized the DEIS prepared for 203 Main LIC. Photo: Alek Lewis

In her comments, Jamesport resident Barbara Blass questioned the objectivity and accuracy of the DEIS.

“The DEIS, with its numerous references to the adjacent Riverview Lofts project, is a classic example of the danger of precedent setting decisions in providing justification for or minimizing potential environmental impacts of subsequent development proposals,” Blass said. “They got IDA benefits, so should we. Their density is even higher than ours, so ours should be approved. They have a sewer

pipe underneath the building, so should we. Those are not the kinds of things you want to hear and see in an objective environmental impact statement.”

Attorney Ashley Pope, representing the Riverhead Central School District, said the Town Board must consider the project’s impacts on the at-capacity schools in the area. The DEIS “appears to underestimate the number of new students which would come from this development, while extremely minimizing the financial impact for the school district,” she said.

Town officials have argued — as they did last night — that the impact of new apartment buildings to school age children has been minimal. According to statistics obtained from the school district and cited by town planner Greg Bergman, the number of students living in apartments downtown is about “in-line” with the .09 student per apartment unit average projected by a 2019 Stony Brook University Real Estate Institute study, which examined the impact of market rate apartments on school district on Long Island. That study was also used by the DEIS to measure the impact of school-age children expected to be housed in the building.

The town’s statistics don’t factor in other apartments in the downtown area, including Riverpoint Apartments located further east, which has 95 children living in the 134 unit complex attending the district, Pope said. The market study is flawed to use for Riverhead, Pope added.

“You have to look at just Suffolk County. Riverhead is not Mineola. Riverhead is not Farmingdale. People are, frankly, not commuting every day from this train station to the city,” Pope said. “It’s a whole different ball game. People move here for different reasons.”

“I think if you actually look at Suffolk County data and further factor into account that this district is growing and continues to grow — unlike much of Long Island — that is just not an accurate number,” Pope said of the DEIS’s estimation.

“The only way to get adequate funding is to make sure that the impacts are actually assessed adequately, and that the district has a seat at the table and has the ability to get the funding in advance,” Pope said.

Aguiar and Council Member Bob Kern also argued during the hearing in response to comments about the proposed building’s impacts to the school district that apartments would not result in many new students because many of students moving into those buildings are already attending the school district. Those claims could not be verified.

The hearing was closed during the meeting. Written comments will be accepted by the town clerk for the official record of the hearing until 4:30 p.m. on June 30.

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