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Wall Street Phase One plans approved

Redevelopment commissioners approved Wednesday night construction plans for Phase One of Wall Street Place subject to conditions that the proposed automated parking facility won't tie up traffic.

"The technology is sort of new and unfamiliar enough as is," said Munro W. Johnson, senior development project manager for the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency, afterward. "So the prospect of it being a (completely) unmanned facility is not going to fly."

POKO Partners LLC, the city's selected developer for the Isaacs Street portion of Wall Street, plans to reshape the 6.3 acres bounded by West Avenue and Wall, Leonard and Isaacs streets with new housing, retail and offices.

Phase One covers the area bounded by Wall and Isaacs streets and the alley next to the former Globe Theatre. The approved construction plans show new construction along Isaacs Street, with building heights ranging from five stories at the corner of Isaacs and Wall streets, to eight stories at the back of Isaacs Street.

The POKO plan also calls for an underground automated parking facility. Motorists will pull their cars into the equivalent of a parking spot, step out and allow a machine to take and park the vehicle. Later, the vehicle would be retrieved automatically.

Phase One calls for construction of 212 automated parking spaces. The parking would be situated at the interior of the site, both underground and at grade, and be covered by a courtyard for residents.

According to Redevelopment Agency staff, the key challenge facing the automated parking facility is "to what extent will the system back up when it's busy?"

Commissioners also want assurances that the system will work.

"What would be the measures that we would take?" asked Timothy Massad, Redevelopment Commission vice chairman. "I'm asking what's the solution?"

Commissioners approved the Phase One construction plans subject to conditions. First, on-site parking personnel must "interface with the public, provide user guidance and respond to problems" for at least one year after the facility opens. In addition, an audit must be conducted within 180 days after the facility opens.

The conditions pose no problems, according to Kenneth M. Olson, managing partner with POKO Partners. Olson could not attend the meeting, but spoke afterward to The Hour.

"I am extremely happy that we got through the approval process at the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency," Olson said. "None of the conditions that were placed on our approvals were a surprise to me. We had negotiated them with the Redevelopment Agency, so we're very, very excited that we're moving forward, and we're only expecting very positive things in connection with our installation of the parking facility."

Last year, Olson said he believed there was "going to be a learning curve" with automated parking. At the same time, he said motorists will "get over their initial fear of losing their car in the machine-kind-of-thing" and become "very comfortable, very quickly" with automated parking, which he said has been used elsewhere in the world for years.

POKO and city officials envision Wall Street Place as a neighborhood where people will live and shop for day-to-day services and necessities. As such, it will not be a generator of destination traffic, according to Timothy T. Sheehan, Redevelopment Agency executive director. A traffic study has been done, he said.

"In terms of traffic volume, there's not a significant increase in traffic volume associated with the project," Sheehan said. "You ultimately are going to have residential volume, but that's dispersed at specific times during the day. You're not going to have repetitive traffic throughout the entire day because the retail that is contemplated is project-based, support retail. It's not destination retail. You're talking about dry cleaners, you're talking about convenience stores."

POKO Partners has not acquired possession of The Globe Theatre property.

Andy Kyriakides, whose wife co-owns the building, has concerns about the density of the development and parking.

"The developer and the Redevelopment Agency have to understand there are other property owners who have rights and those rights have to be preserved," Kyriakides said afterward. "We have 154 parking spaces for the theater. That's going to be a major issue — that we maintain the existing parking spaces. We still have plans to go ahead and develop mixed use with a cultural use (for the theater)."

Overall, POKO plans to fill the area bounded by West Avenue, and Wall, Leonard and Isaacs streets with 371 housing units, 42,481 square feet of retail space, 33,230 square feet of live/work space, and 1,040 parking spaces — including existing public spaces and new spaces, under the land disposition agreement approved by the council.

The approval of the construction plans sets POKO on track for breaking ground later this year or early next year. The developer still needs site-plan approval from the city's Zoning Commission.