

Developer Backs Off Armstrong School Project

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A North Carolina-based developer said Monday he is dropping plans to redevelop the defunct Armstrong School in light of community opposition.

Jim Sari, CEO of The Landmark Group, said he withdrew his proposal last week after encountering strong neighborhood protests and an unfavorable vote by the planning commission.

“I’m a proactive, community-type developer,” Sari said. “I don’t want to do something that has a groundswell against it.”

Landmark was proposing to convert the old Armstrong School property on Monsview Place near lower Rivermont Avenue into a 60-unit affordable apartment complex. The project included renovating the school and constructing a new three-story building that would house the bulk of the apartments.

It was this new construction that sparked most of the conflict. Neighbors raised objections ranging from excessive density to incompatibility with the surrounding single-family neighborhood to fears about increased crime.

Sari said Monday he had erred by not holding a community meeting prior to coming to the planning commission two weeks ago, although, he added that he felt it was unlikely he could have convinced the neighbors to support the plan.

“They had some legitimate concerns about density,” he said. “The problem is that’s the density I need to make it work. So we were sort of at an impasse. Which is fine. I’ve done a lot of work in Lynchburg ... I love Lynchburg. There are no hard feelings at all.”

Landmark has previously done the City Market Lofts project in downtown and the recently completed Kemper Street Lofts at 1401 Kemper St. The company was the first to express serious interest in the vacant Armstrong School since the city stopped actively using it in 2002.

Armstrong started out in 1917 as an all-black elementary school. The two-story brick building was last used to house a regional alternative education program. Today, only its gym and athletic fields are used occasionally for various youth programs.

City Manager Kimball Payne said Sari notified him of the decision to withdraw on Jan. 19. Payne’s reaction to the outcome was muted.

“We had never thought this was a done deal, an absolute, from the beginning,” he said. “Nobody wants to go against the neighborhood ... Maybe one day we’ll find a use for the building.”

The city will still continue to mention the school to developers searching for projects, he added.

As part of its proposal, Landmark had offered to pay the city \$500,000 for the school land. Sari had said he expected the total project would cost around \$9 million.

The company had been seeking to rezone the property for multi-family housing as part of its plan to apply for low-income housing tax credits from the state later this year. Projects with properly zoned sites get extra points in the tax credit scoring process.

The planning commission voted Jan. 13 to recommend denial of the rezoning. It was scheduled to come to City Council on Feb. 9, but Sari, noting the mounting opposition, said he did not want to “try and climb a greased rope.”

Sari added that Landmark was still interested in the Lynchburg market and was considering other projects in the city, although he declined to go into specifics Monday.