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News

Studio staying alive

Thursday, June 4, 2009

By GARY PULEO
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NORRISTOWN — Though a developer’s original vision of transforming Logan Square Shopping Center into a Hollywood dream factory has been dramatically tweaked, it is no less grand these days, according to the new “face” behind the project.

“We know that people may think nothing has been going on there for the last 12–18 months, but we’re ready to come out from behind the curtain and show you what we got,” said Brad Haber, of Haber & Associates real estate development.

As project executive and consultant to “low profile” developer Charles Gallub of Develcom, Haber arrived at The Times Herald office on Wednesday afternoon, enthused about the rebirth of what will be known as Studio Centre.

“This is terribly exciting,” said Haber. “I’ve been a developer for 35 years, and I have never worked in a situation where the planning board, the commissioner, the body politic is so supportive of a project as everyone here has been.”

Haber is counting on continued support come Tuesday when he and Gallub present their latest plans for an application for land development approval before the Norristown Planning Commission.

“It hasn’t been easy,” Haber said. “But in terms of the commitment, it’s been fabulous. We’re working with the unions to make sure that the unions benefit from this project, both in training and job opportunities. We’re happy about the fact that we’ve been able to stabilize a deteriorating shopping center in your town.”

Among the improvements already established at the shopping center, Haber pointed to “the magnificent office” of State Sen. Daylin Leach, D-17th Dist., and the addition of Impact Thrift Store and Sign-a-Rama.

With i’s to be dotted and t’s to be crossed, Haber promised that big things will be happening in the

coming weeks, including a lease agreement with a major supermarket and an expanded, “jazzed up” Sessano’s restaurant.

Haber acknowledged that Gallub’s initial eagerness back in 2007 was ultimately tempered by the nuts and bolts of the situation as the months passed.

“About two years ago when Charles looked at the property, he had a vision to bring a Hollywood studio production facility to Norristown, taking advantage of the fact that there was recently introduced at that time a Pennsylvania tax film credit,” Haber said. “That’s a very attractive program to the film industry.

“When Charles decided to build this, he didn’t have a clear idea how big these things needed to be,” he added. “He had a vision reduced to a drawing, and as we researched the film industry we realized you can’t even find one 50,000-square-foot sound stage in Hollywood because it’s way too big.”

Though the proposal may have been ambitious, it wasn’t completely out of left field, Haber said.

For about a year now, the independent outfit Raleigh Studios has been operating with 150,000 square feet of space, which includes 80,000 square feet of newly constructed soundstages and a portion of what used to be the main floor of the former Sears building.

In lieu of some of the space originally intended as soundstages, plans are now in the works for post-production rooms, a commissary and executive offices.

“They’re all important to a facility,” Haber said.

He likened running a studio to managing a hotel.

“Just like a hotel is operated by Marriott, studios are operated by operators. We’re real estate developers, not a movie production company. We hire Raleigh like Schmo Developer hires Marriott to run his facility.

“Raleigh is the largest independent operator of studio facilities in the country. In Hollywood, you know who Raleigh is.”

He furthered the analogies by saying that when Governor Rendell introduced the film tax credit two years ago, “he created a league, but he didn’t build any stadiums. We’re building the first stadium where they can play.”

With that stadium’s future now threatened by a bill passed by the Senate, which would eliminate the film tax credit that sparked the Logan Square renaissance, state Rep. Matt Bradford, D-70th Dist., will hold a news conference at 9 a.m. Thursday.

The conference will be held in front of Bradford’s Norristown Constituent Service Office in Logan Square Shopping Center, 1846 Markley St., Norristown.

Bradford will be joined by Gallub, Montgomery County Commissioner Joe Hoeffel, Norristown Council President Cathy Lawrence, Philadelphia Film Office Executive Director Sharon Pinkerson and local business and labor leaders, as well as other supporters of the tax credit.

A press release indicated that Bradford regarded the film tax credit as being vital to the redevelopment of Logan Square, as well as the larger revitalization of Norristown. The studio project would generate hundreds of construction jobs, as well as additional jobs operating the studio, Bradford noted.

According to a May 24 story in The Times Herald, Leach said the proposed movie production studio “is critical to Norristown’s development and the state’s \$75 million film tax credit program ‘critical’ to the Studio Centre project.

“The studio goes away if we lose the tax credit. When you make a mainstream movie in Pennsylvania, it’s hundreds and hundreds of people for months. Hotel rooms, meals, equipment rentals, everything, it is a huge benefit in many ways. The Logan Square thing is dependent on the existence of that tax credit.”

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