

ALLIANCE OF DELRAY DEFENDING THE COMMUNITY

Delray flea market may be redeveloped



Mike Diamond Special to Palm Beach Post
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The days may be numbered for the iconic Big Apple Shopping Bazaar, the indoor facility west of Delray Beach on Atlantic Avenue that has been hawking flea-market items for the past 30 years.

The current owner, Delray Beach-based West Atlantic Commercial Properties, wants to demolish the 35,000-square-foot building and replace it with a 140,000-square-foot self-storage facility, a 16-pump gas station with a 2,000 square-foot convenience store and a car wash. A 150-foot communications tower would remain.

The Zoning Commission will consider the application Thursday and is expected to make a recommendation to county commissioners.

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Formerly known as the Carnival Flea Market, the facility has seen better days. It was not all that long ago when it was difficult to find a parking space on the 4.5-acre parcel. This past Sunday, there were few cars in the lot, more than half of the 180 booths were shuttered and there were more vendors in the Bazaar than patrons.

"This place was happening at one time and then.... there are so many missing vendors. The venue is just a ghost of what it once was," said a comment on Trip Advisor.

Is the new idea too much traffic for West Atlantic Avenue?

The Alliance of Delray Residential Associations is concerned about the additional traffic that the project will generate and the height of the five-story self-storage building. President Lori Vinikoor has called on the county to require "a less intense project" with construction put off until West Atlantic Avenue is expanded. She also noted that there are already

a number of service stations and car washes in the area.

Meanwhile, the vendors that remain say they are disappointed over the lack of information provided by management.

"We hear a lot of rumors," said Robert Levin, the owner of Ms. Opals Wig Shop. "It would be nice if they let us know what their plans are." Levin learned from a Palm Beach Post reporter of the redevelopment proposal submitted to the county.

One vendor, who asked not to be identified, said there is "a lot of anxiety" among the businesses that are still operating. Some are on month-to-month leases.

Levin, who operates a number of wig shops, took over an existing business last summer and inherited a lease that won't expire until later this year. He said his business does not depend on foot traffic, noting that his customers come looking for wigs.

"I have actually been happy with the level of business although it would certainly be a lot better if there were more vendors and customers here," he said.

Vendors lease 10-by-10 stalls. Levin uses six of them. "I am hoping that we will see a big pickup in business now that

we are into the winter season."

Joel Cohen has operated Eyewear Bazaar for more than 20 years.

"This has been the best year I have had," he said, noting, like Levin, that his business does not depend on walk-in customers. "I have a lot of repeat business."

Cohen and Levin said they both have begun to look for other options should the Bazaar close. Meanwhile, they say that the location is excellent and there is a benefit from the lack of customers: Parking is never a problem.

West Atlantic Avenue land is extremely valuable

West Atlantic Commercial Properties, owned by Anthony and Laura Pugliese, bought the flea-market operation in 2000 when it was known as the Carnival Flea Market. Its current market value is \$2.7 million, according to the county property appraiser. Even if the flea market was operating at full capacity as it once did, the value of land on West Atlantic Avenue has risen so much that an indoor flea market is not the best use of the property, according to a number of commercial realtors.

A spokesman for Big Apple Bazaar

said that plans call for the facility to remain open for at least two more years. He said booths are being leased on both a yearly and a monthly basis. When the flea market opened in 1991, its barbers offered \$4 haircuts. There were early-bird sales and a number of restaurants. Until recently, the outside of the building featured an extensive produce operation where vegetables and fruits were sold.

Meanwhile, the Puglieses have a hurdle to overcome.

They are asking the county to change the zoning from general commercial to multiple planned use development (MUPD). The minimum size required for an MUPD is five acres; the parcel is only 4.53 acres. They are seeking a variance, claiming there is no way for them to acquire the additional half acre because the adjacent properties are developed.

County planners have received more than 70 letters from area residents opposed to the project, arguing that "it is incompatible with surrounding uses."

The builder, however, notes that there are four shopping centers at the intersection of West Atlantic Avenue and Military Trail, which is just east of the Apple Bazaar, claiming the project will "complement the uses at this commercial node."

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