

First of two public hearings tonight on Lane Parke at Mountain Brook Village development

By William Thornton -- The Birmingham News

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An artist's rendering shows the proposed Lane Parke at Mountain Brook Village development.

Decision time is near for Mountain Brook on the proposed Lane Parke at Mountain Brook Village development.

The City Council has scheduled two public hearings, tonight and Nov. 9, to consider whether to grant planned unit zoning to the development. The council could vote on the zoning following the second hearing or at a later meeting, said Council President Virginia Smith.

Lane Parke would replace the existing Mountain Brook Shopping Center and Park Lane Apartments, and would be built in three phases over several years. The developer, Evson Inc., is controlled by members of the Evans family, longtime owners of the property.

Plans for Lane Parke call for 217,000 square feet of retail space, 26,000 square feet of office space, 2 acres of public park space, more than 1,200 parking places and a boutique hotel. The plan also includes condominiums and town houses.

While some public comments about the development at a series of public hearings have been positive, other residents say they oppose the scope of the project. Rick Sprague, a Birmingham architect who lives in Mountain Brook, said the development is three times bigger than it should be and would spoil the small-town suburban market feeling of the village.

"I think there is a growing concern about this development," Sprague said. "And I think until they make some significant changes in the concepts and size of the development, concern is going to continue to grow. This kind of development has never been allowed before in Mountain Brook."

City Councilman Bob Moody said he thinks the development will add too many cars to the village's two-lane roads.

"As currently proposed, I think the Lane Parke project would be devastating for Mountain Brook Village," Moody said. "I know what the traffic studies say, but to say there will be no appreciable change in traffic sort of defies logic."

At the development's Web site, www.laneparke.com, the owners of the property, this month posted "Straight Answers," a series of video answers to 21 questions and written answers to 13 questions. Video answers are provided by the development site's owner, A.A. "Rele" Evans.

Members of the development team say they hope the answers will counter what they say has been misinformed opposition in the community to the development plan.

"What we're finding is that when people know more about this, they don't have any opposition to it," said Ken Findley, a project consultant.

The Web site answers are aimed at making residents comfortable with the development. Jeffrey Brewer, an architect with Birmingham's Goodwyn, Mills & Cawood, estimated developers have spent about \$300,000 making changes to the overall design in response to questions from city officials, merchants and residents.

"There's a perception out there, we think, that we've only been working on this for about six months," said Robert Jolly, a retail consultant with the project. "The truth is we've been working on this for more than two years."

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