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Orland OKs 9750 On the Park

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The Regional editor

Over the objections of most of the residents who packed its meeting Monday night, Orland Park's Village Board voted to approve the permits, redevelopment agreement and funding of the 295-unit luxury apartment building it plans to build in a public/private partnership at 9750 W. 143rd St.

Only a few of the more than 200 residents who crowded the Orland Park Village Board chambers for the second time since Labor Day to oppose the village's plan to fund the construction of the \$63 million luxury apartment building took the last opportunity afforded them to speak on the record for or against the project.

Village trustees each proceeded to give their views before they voted unanimously to approve the site plan, special-use permit and subdivision to move forward with the project: the first phase to develop a Downtown Orland Park in the Main Street Triangle redevelopment area bounded by 143rd Street, La Grange Road and the Metra railroad tracks running the diagonal along Southwest Highway.

The motion to approve was made by Trustee Kathleen Fenton, who spoke with passion about Orland Park's demonstrated ability to consistently attract major, big-name retailers and other firms as a desirable place to do business.

Although Trustee Brad O'Halloran voted with the rest of the board to permit the project, he cast the sole dissenting votes against authorizing the redevelopment agreement with the developer selected as the village's private partner, and also the loan agreement for the future issuance of general obligation bonds that will fund it. Indianapolis-based developer Flaherty & Collins is putting up only about \$2 million of the nearly \$65 million estimated cost to fund the project.

It is the village's intention to finance the remaining \$63 million through a bank line of credit, then the issue of general obligation bonds that O'Halloran objects to, he explained. While O'Halloran supports the Main Street Triangle redevelopment project, and is "not against the [upscale] apartment complex," he said to loud applause that he opposes the financing plan. He explained his opposition can be traced to Aug. 5 when Standard and Poor's downgraded the U.S. government's bond rating for the first time in its history. He pointed to the debt burden of both the federal and state governments. And because of "too

much debt,” he blamed the volatile Stock Market.

The borrowing of some \$63 million by the village to capitalize the Ninety7Fifty On the Park project will “almost double the debt of our village” O’Halloran said. “It’s too much risk at this time.”

As a sop to O’Halloran, Mayor Daniel J. McLaughlin agreed to have village staff “explore the option of reducing the risk to the village — to mitigate the risk.” To do so, one of the agenda items added and also approved by the Village Board Monday was a resolution to authorize village “staff to explore, identify and evaluate various fund options for Ninety7Fifty On the Park.”

“Folks everywhere have told me this is too much money to risk in this challenging economic time,” O’Halloran concluded. “For this reason I can’t support the redevelopment agreement for this project.”

On the other side of the issue, Trustee Fenton expressed her faith that Orland Park’s track record and reputation bode well for the success of the project. The planned mixed-use luxury rental residential-above-commercial complex would take up an entire block at 143rd Street and Ravinia Avenue, which is to be extended north beyond its T-intersection at 143rd, where the Orland Plaza shopping center purchased by the village is to be demolished.

Fenton disagreed with the contention of some residents who claimed at the public meeting on Sept. 6 that the down economy has resulted in widespread commercial vacancies across the village. She listed several stores planning to move into and open in the village, such as Berkot’s supermarket at 159th and Wolf Road, and Dave and Busters in the old Orland Square cinema. She noted that the village’s tax increment finance district paid off early to transform a “dead mall” into the now thriving Orland Park Place. “Premier stores are coming in,” Fenton said. “They could have chosen Palos or Tinley, but they chose Orland Park.”

Fenton also hit the opinion expressed by many opponents that the luxury apartments plan will fail because single young professionals do not want to live in Orland Park. “I am single. I live here, I love it here,” Fenton said. “I buried my husband here and I am going to stay here.”

Luxury apartments in this region are in short supply and high demand, Trustee Patricia Gira said. She noted that the village has laid the groundwork for a successful residential development in the Triangle by creating a water feature that will be an attraction for restaurants, Crescent Park and a new commuter train station. Before the redevelopment, the land “was a mess,” a fly-dumping ground for refuse, she noted.

Trustee James Dodge asserted that the village will earn more than enough money in home-rule sales tax revenue over the next 10 years, combined with other revenues, to cover the costs of repaying the bank loan and bond issues for the project. “This won’t hit your property tax bills, period. Full stop,” he said.

Trustee Edward Schussler said the village has \$37 million in fund balance reserves. He noted that even after borrowing \$63 million to fund Niney7Fifty, the village's total outstanding debt will be less than 3 percent of the equalized assessed valuation of all taxable real property in the village. To keep Orland Park on its path of growth and progress "in this economy, calls for creativity and innovation," he said.

Foes of the project contend few would be willing to pay upwards of \$1,500 a month to live in Orland Park and fill all of its 295 units, despite the amenities planned for 9750 On the Park, including a salt-water swimming pool, fitness center, spa and luxury unit interiors. The most recent market forecast for this type of housing commissioned by the village by Valerie S. Kretchner & Associates described its marketability as "very positive," Trustee Gira noted after the meeting.

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