

ST. PAUL

Ryan's plan for Ford site moves forward with 6-1 vote on St. Paul council

Ryan's vision for site moves forward with 6-1 vote.

By James Walsh (<http://www.startribune.com/james-walsh/10646161/>) Star Tribune |

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The development of the former Ford property in St. Paul's Highland Park will include a contentious element — single-family houses along the Mississippi River.

The development's future became clearer Wednesday as the City Council voted 6-1 to change the area's master zoning plan to better align with what developer Ryan Companies said it can sell. That includes allowing up to 35 single-family houses among the 3,800 units of housing Ryan said will be built on the 122-acre site.

Council Member Rebecca Noecker was the dissenter. She said she appreciated the work that went into the plan, but she continues to think single-family houses should not be a part of the package.

"Especially with our affordable housing needs," she said. "I continue to believe we can have multifamily housing along the river."

Council Member Mitra Jalali Nelson, who voted against the amendments two weeks ago, voted in favor of the changes Wednesday. She said she "struggled a bit" with the single-family houses, as well as an increase in commercial parking at the site's northern edge, but in the end she decided "it was time to move forward."

She added: "Given the totality of the plan, I could not justify voting against the plan based on two things I disagreed with."

Council Member Chris Tolbert, who represents Highland Park and presented the amendments that Ryan officials had said they needed for the development's success, said the developer can still build multifamily housing along Mississippi River Boulevard.

"There's nothing that prohibits that," he said.

Ryan officials won praise from previously resistant neighbors for including single-family houses as meshing with existing housing. Advocates for higher density have lamented that the plan doesn't go far enough to wean people off large lots, big houses and driving their cars.

Next up on the list of Ryan requests: Public financing. Ryan has asked for \$107 million, as part of a "public-private partnership" to build infrastructure at the site and to help build 760 units of affordable housing.

"It's a watershed moment," said Mike Ryan, president of the company's North Region. "It's the culmination of more than a decade's work by a lot of people."

Wednesday's action allows Ryan to begin work at the site. It's unlikely, however, that excavators and bulldozers will be firing up soon. The infrastructure — roads, electrical, sewer and water, and a stormwater collection feature that will essentially be a stream that feeds Hidden Falls (<http://www.startribune.com/restored-stream-to-be-central-feature-of-ford-redevelopment/499507121/>) — needs to be built, at least in part, before buildings can start going up.

Ryan officials had said they hope to begin "moving dirt" by fall. So when will they need to know how much the city is willing to put into the project?

"We don't know right now," Mike Ryan said. "We want to celebrate this for a minute."

Some of that public money will go to Ryan to develop affordable housing that will make up 20 percent of the housing that is built.



RYAN COMPANIES

A March rendering for Ryan Co.'s proposal for the Ford plant site in St. Paul.

St. Paul in 2016 established a tax-increment financing district encompassing the Ford site, allowing for a maximum of up to \$275 million at the site. That money would be repaid through increased property taxes for up to 25 years.

The City Council is expected to hold hearings sometime over the next few months on the financial side of the plan. Tolbert said after the council vote that those discussions will likely come to a head this summer.

Ford still owns the site and chose Ryan to be the master developer. Ryan Companies, developer of CHS Field in St. Paul and of the Downtown East area surrounding U.S. Bank Stadium, is expected to eventually close on the purchase sometime in the next several months.

City leaders have long coveted the increased property tax base and housing stock a fully developed Ford site is expected to provide.

While Ryan's plan is not a perfect match to what they'd hoped for, several council members said it comes close.

Ryan officials say they plan to build less density than the 4,000 units the city wanted, but not by much.

The plan is to put up 3,800 units of housing on 40 new city blocks, with a mix of single-family houses, condos, row houses, apartment buildings and senior rentals. No building would be taller than six stories. More than 50 acres would be set aside as public-access open space. The developer has promised to plant at least 1,000 trees and create a couple of parks within the development.

Ryan even plans to preserve two of the three Ford Little League Baseball fields, another step that won over neighbors.

City officials have said the site has a potential redevelopment value of \$1.3 billion and could bring in new tax revenue of more than \$20 million annually. Ryan estimated that the project will create more than 14,000 construction jobs and 1,300 permanent jobs in a variety of industries after its completion.

James Walsh is a reporter covering St. Paul and its neighborhoods. He has had myriad assignments in nearly 30 years at the Star Tribune, including federal courts and St. Paul schools.

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