

ST. PAUL

St. Paul planners reject single-family homes in Ford project

St. Paul Planning Commission says no; developer to keep trying.

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

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The St. Paul Planning Commission on Friday rejected Ryan Cos.' plan to build 35 single-family homes as part of the massive redevelopment of the former Ford plant.

The single-family homes along Mississippi River Boulevard had proved one of the most popular features of the 122-acre redevelopment (<http://www.startribune.com/ryan-cos-wins-over-neighbors-with-scaled-back-plan-for-ford-site/505645172/>), judging by reaction at the Jan. 25 public hearing. While the commission approved most of Ryan's other proposed changes to the plan, it determined the single-family homes didn't square with the city's density goals.

The final decision lies with the City Council, and a Ryan representative said Friday it plans to seek approval for the single-family homes there.

"We have to talk over all that was brought up to see how that impacts our planning," said Tony Barranco, Ryan's senior vice president for real estate development. "We really need to see how all these changes mesh together."

By a 13-0 vote, commissioners recommended holding to the master plan's goals of transforming the Ford site into the high density urban village (<http://www.startribune.com/ryan-companies-announces-plans-for-an-urban-village-at-st-paul-s-ford-site/496765651/>), sought after by city planners and housing advocates, even on the prime real estate along the river.

"I think what we're trying to do is provide access to one of the most sought-after areas of the development," said Commissioner Luis Rangel Morales.

The city's master plan, approved in September 2017, lays out a street grid and determines where housing, retail and office space would go. It also called for multifamily homes of two to six units along the river.

While Ryan, chosen by Ford last summer to serve as master developer, has mostly adhered to that plan, it unveiled some proposed changes. One of those changes, which drew applause at neighborhood meetings, was building single-family homes nearest the river, similar to the stately homes that already line the river bluff to the north and south of the site.

Popular with community

In numerous meetings over the summer and fall with area residents, Barranco said, two things proved hugely popular with a community that had been divided over the city's master plan: preserving the longstanding Highland Little League fields and building at least some single-family homes on Mississippi River Boulevard.

In all, Ryan has proposed 32 amendments to the master plan, including requesting a slight increase in commercial parking, row houses on the west side of a planned water feature and which roads should go through the site. For most, there was little opposition to what the developer wants to do.

Council Member Chris Tolbert, who represents the area, said the changes that Ryan was seeking did not seem unreasonable, including building single-family homes.

"The master plan is meant to be a framework for development," Tolbert said. "It's not ironclad."



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The former Ford assembly plant site, looking east, with Highland Village and then downtown St. Paul off in the distance.

Tolbert and others have praised Ryan for listening to the community while also embracing the broader goals for the development. The single-family homes are a comparatively small part of a 3,800-unit housing mix that would include condominiums, apartment complexes and senior housing. Twenty percent of the total would be affordable housing, Ryan has said.

But Ryan officials have said the single-family homes would also act as a catalyst for the development, drawing early buyers to a site that is expected to take 20 years to build out. Barranco left little doubt that building those homes will continue to be part of Ryan's overall wish list.

"Our communication with elected officials in the council chambers won't be very different," he said.

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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