

Francisco Landing opens doors for Hopewell

By Lyndon German, H-P Writer

Posted Dec 11, 2018 at 7:08 PM

Updated Dec 11, 2018 at 7:08 PM

City, developers share common vision of big things stemming from the multi-million dollar Francisco Landing project

HOPEWELL - After 14 months of discussion, City Council unanimously approved the transfer and sale of one of its more historic properties. The site commonly known as the Copeland Site is a lush, green field where the old Patrick Copeland School once stood. It will be developed by Francisco Landing Holdings LLC.

The development agreement was reviewed, amended and finally approved on Nov. 27 of this year. Developers Ed and Chip Bowman signed the necessary documents to take control of the property on Dec. 6.

The multi-acreage parcel was sold for \$391,232.65, according to the development agreement, though that's only phase one. Other portions will be sold and transferred throughout after that phase is complete. If the first phase of construction goes well, the accompanying phases will bring a projected \$40 million in investments to Hopewell.

For years, the city of Hopewell has reached out to developers about the space, though as Assistant City Manager Charles F. Dane characterized, this particular project is a "game changer" and brings the full potential of the site.

"This may sound corny, but I think various pieces of land deserve certain levels of attention from us," said Dane. "This is probably the one that deserved the highest, or if not the highest, one of the top two or three highest levels of attention that we could give a project."

The Development

What developers Chip and Ed Bowman proposed to the city is a multi-phase development that would bolster the downtown community by increasing housing, commercial spaces and enhance public spaces. The first phase of the project will add 175 market-rate apartments and three commercial spaces. The two apartment buildings will adjoin a public promenade and green space overlooking the river.

If that goes well, the development agreement allows the purchase of adjacent parcel located on Cawson Street across from the Appomattox Regional Library where they plan to build an additional 200 apartments as well as commercial spaces.

The same option applies to a site overlooking City Point Park next to First Baptist Church where the developers have agreed to construct a public amphitheater. The project will also adhere to the city's planned unit development (PUD) zoning which requires 50 percent of the land to be green space and the promenade, amphitheater and other public access areas are to be repurchased by the city after it's developed for future use.

City officials say these agreements were all carefully looked over by the City Manager's office, the Downtown Design Review Committee, the Planning Commission, the Economic Development Authority and City Council in a true collaborative effort.

"We knew this parcel was critical to the community," Dane continued. "One, it bolsters downtown. Two, it bolsters the waterfront, the riverwalk and the park and all the things we've done there. And, three, it bolsters the festivals we're having downtown — it bolsters all that, so making sure all those pieces came together was hard, and they worked really hard on it."

Dane commended the Bowman brothers, Ed and Chip, for being communicative and flexible through the year long process of designing and redesigning.

"We wanted to make sure this process was inclusive as possible," Dane continued, "I think of the three times we got together and reviewed where we were up to that point, we let them [City staff] ask questions. They [the Bowman Brothers] would go back and find the answers to those questions and it worked incredibly well each step of the way."

He added, "They assured us they would work on the answers to those questions each step of the way, and when we talked about it in the meeting we'd ask 'Is everybody okay, with this moving forward?' And each time, as a group, we'd agree unanimously."

Over the 14-month period of the project's conception, there have been multiple iterations.

"We had to look at everything," Chip Bowman stated. "From the positions of the buildings to their density, the height of the buildings, the interiors, what to do with public spaces, how it's built, the materials. Then we had to give those plans back to the city for questions. So there were a lot of tentacles you know, in a way it's not your typical development project."

"To be perfectly honest I don't know if most developers would have stuck around that long," he added. "Most development deals are black and white. You say I want to purchase a piece property and build a certain space, Council looks over it and says yes or no."

Though this project is far from the norm for Hopewell and the Bowman brothers, it's a special part of their legacy.

"We wanted to see this one through," Chip Bowman added.

The Past

Outside Hopewell's municipal building sits a bust of Peter Francisco, an 18th-century man found as a child on the docks of City Point when Hopewell was still a part of Prince George County. Though he didn't speak any English, Francisco rose to be an iconic figure in Virginia as distinguished soldier in the Revolutionary War.

Also known as the 'The Giant of Revolution', Francisco's mark on history is recognized all over Virginia, and his lineage continues today in the Bowman brothers.

"I didn't know they were related to Peter Francisco until we were standing on the Patrick Copeland property and that's when they told me about it," Dane recalled. "It was a real moving moment. It was then I thought this was meant to be. I had no clue."

The Bowman brothers were well-versed with their family's history.

"So as little boys we grew up next door to our grandparents and my grandmother was a genealogist," Ed Bowman remembered. "So we've always known about our connection to Peter Francisco. There's actually a picture we have in our office of Peter's restored manor in Buckingham County."

After becoming developers and their awareness of their family's history, the Bowman brothers

aimed to create similar legacy.

The Legacy

“You know one of the goals for this project was to make sure it was balanced,” Chip Bowman stated in describing how this project will be one to make a longlasting impact in Hopewell.

“We wanted to make sure we achieved aspects of keeping the view of the water open, making sure that we didn’t overwhelm anything else around it by going too big or too high or too crowded,” he said. “So it was a balancing act, we had to incorporate what the city wanted, what the people who live in the city wanted, what the property would allow us to do and what we needed to put up financially.”

Through that process of communicating between residents in open meetings learning their insights on the property, communicating with Council and communicating with staff, the Bowman brothers believe what they’ve created aligns with Hopewell’s best interests, and the Bowman brothers want to hit the ground running.

“Our objective is to start as soon as the dust settles,” Ed Bowman said, inferring that they plan to start a pre-leasing program for commercial business. “One of the things we can do is to start our pre-leasing program, getting the word out on what we’re doing and what we’re building as it relates to the commercial opportunities.”

As far as the assistant city manager is concerned, the extra retail and housing space enhances Hopewell’s expanding downtown area and aligns with the city’s goals of increasing residential density downtown.

The city has approved a variety of housing projects under different classifications. Though the Bowmans’ plan to build market-rate homes, the city has already approved a number of workforce housing units. Dane claims the projects will mesh well together and continue to improve the downtown area without necessarily competing against each other.

“The people who work there need a place to live and sometimes those people take lower paying or part time jobs and can’t afford a market rate apartment,” Dane said. “The workforce housing helps bridge that a little bit, to provide some housing that’s affordable. So the combination is good, but you’ve got to drive market rate housing upward to be successful.”

Lyndon German covers Hopewell for the Hopewell Herald and Prince George Post.