



## **White Plains' move for Platinum Mile' to shift to residential faces backlash**

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**David Propper** | August 16, 2021

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Known as one of Westchester County's most recognizable strips of office buildings, Westchester Avenue's future appears to be less a hub for white-collar workers and more for residential and beyond.

Part of a countywide trend and beyond, office space continues to be turned into other uses, in most cases, residential.

Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the market for office space has shrunk considerably as remote work becomes more common and for some companies permanent.

Westchester County Association (WCA) Executive Director Michael Romita said Westchester Avenue, known as the "Platinum Mile," is undergoing an "interesting and successful experiment in adoptive reuse."

"You have the development of almost a new neighborhood of mixed uses in what was primarily just a strip of commercial office parks," Romita said, adding. "At the end of the day, these municipalities have a choice: They can either try to keep up with market trends or they can be left with obsolete office buildings that create white elephants in the community."

The latest example of this transformation is a proposed project at The Exchange at 701-777 Westchester Avenue in White Plains. The plan calls on an existing office building to be knocked down and replaced with 360 apartments. At his highest point, the project would be five stories, but then step down to four stories and then three.

Opponents believe the proposal doesn't fit into the neighborhood. Residents from five homeowner associations against it say projects like that belong in the city's walkable downtown.

The White Plains City Council would need to greenlight a zoning amendment to allow the developer, Senlac Ridge Partners, to seek site plan approval. It's unclear how quickly the project would move forward if it were approved.

"White Plains is a small city. There's a very delicate balance between the downtown and the outlier areas," Gedney Homeowner Association Board President John Sheehan said. "We want to maintain, as many people in city, in all neighborhoods, protect our existing neighborhoods in a low-density nature."

**'Outdated office parks'**



Challenges facing the market for office space were only exasperated by the pandemic, attorney for Senlac, Seth Mandelbaum said during a City Council hearing in June.

The vacancy rate over the last decade in Westchester has increased to 23.1% from 16.1% even as the county office inventory has downsized by 2 million square feet during that time, according to the Senlac.

The five combined office buildings at The Exchange are currently 72% occupied and 701 Westchester Ave. is only half occupied with Senlac stating occupancy is expected to decrease. "The market for suburban office space has been and remains challenging," Giorgio Vlamis, of Senlac, said in a statement. "Meanwhile there has been a clear trend toward repurposing suburban office parks into mixed-use projects. We think this property is a great candidate for change."

Further down the Platinum Mile toward Harrison, residential construction is underway at 1133 Westchester Ave. The NRP Group is building 303 market-rate apartments near the 620,000 square foot office complex. The three-five story buildings are expected to be done by 2022. There are also two additional residential projects on the same stretch of road proposed in Harrison: One plan, by NRP Group, calls for a five-story, 200-apartment rental building on Webb Avenue, on a 9.54-acre parcel next to the office complex at 800 Westchester Ave. And the other project, proposed by Senlac, would demolish an office building at 2700 Westchester Ave. and construct a complex of 69 two-story townhouses.

Other new uses for the 'Platinum Mile' include education, medical, recreation, retail, hospitality and residential over the last decade, Romita, of the WCA, noted. Developer Martin Ginsburg, head of Ginsburg Development Companies, said the transformation of Westchester Avenue is a healthy sign for the county. It indicates developers are willing to undertake the necessary changes to ensure properties don't become desolate, he said.

Ginsburg recently completed the conversion of office space to luxury residential units in the downtown White Plains at 1 Martine Place with a ribbon-cutting celebrated in June. To change the space from office to apartments was time-consuming and required creativity, he said; essentially they had to "reinvent" what an apartment was to fit the space. "What you're seeing right now is more demolition of office buildings," Ginsburg said. "The downtown is really painful to do demolition of these big buildings but they've been doing in the more suburban area like Westchester Avenue."

### **'I know which I'd prefer'**

But residents who live near the vicinity of the 701 Westchester Ave. proposal don't think apartments should be situated in a more suburban area.



Sheehan, the Gedney Association president, questioned how quickly those proposed apartments would become occupied. He thinks people want to be within walking distance to shops, restaurants, mass transit and other activities, which the downtown offers.

Along with the Gedney Association, the North Main Street Association, Old Oak Ridge Residents Association, Havilands Manor Homeowners Association and Rosedale Residential Association all oppose the project. Sheehan also noted single-family homes have been scooped up at a faster pace in the suburbs than apartments.

In line with that thinking, Bob Friscia, North Street Association president, said a cluster of townhouses would be an appropriate use for that parcel, similar to another Westchester Avenue project over the border in Harrison.

Friscia said homeowners associations began to speak up more about the development in the city, including the Platinum Mile, in the face of the rapid growth occurring.

"Why are we putting all these multi-family houses in place, who's coming here and where are the jobs for these people," Friscia said.

Resident Don Buchwald said anyone who lives on Westchester Avenue would need a car unlike in the downtown. Interstate 287 runs between the northbound and southbound sides of Westchester Avenue and sidewalks are non-existent.

"Between there and living in an apartment downtown, I know which I'd prefer," Buchwald said. "On the other hand, I think it's important to the city that the downtown projects be successful." But Builders Institute of Westchester Executive Director Timothy Foley said arguments that multi-family homes only belong in the downtown don't hold weight.

Foley said demand for housing in White Plains and Westchester far exceeds the current supply. He said the Westchester Housing Needs Assessment found in 2019 that the county needs to build more than 11,000 affordable housing units to meet the number of people who want to live in Westchester.

The Builders Institute supports the 701 project, even though Senlac is not a client of theirs, Foley said.

"I think a lot of people say you should have development only downtown because it's not near my particular neighborhood," Foley said. "Those are voices we have heard throughout history; they were wrong then and they're wrong now."

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