

SAN RAFAEL

Planners approve BioMarin complex

Senior center, apartments in joint Whistlestop plan

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The San Rafael Planning Commission has approved a proposal to build 67 apartments, a senior center and an office complex on a 3-acre lot downtown.

Commissioners voted unanimously on Tuesday to approve the redevelopment plan for 999 Third St., which was submitted in a joint proposal by the pharmaceutical company BioMarin and the senior services nonprofit Whistlestop.

"I'm really happy to see this project is finally coming to an end," said Jeffrey Schoppert, the commission chair. "I think it's going to be a terrific addition to downtown."

With an endorsement from the Planning Commission, the proposal is set for consideration by the City Council, which will have final say on the redevelopment plan. A public hearing before the City Council hasn't been scheduled, officials said.

BioMarin hopes to build two four-story buildings on the site, each reaching 72 feet in height. The complex, which would provide space for about 550 new workers, would include laboratory and office space, and would be a major expansion to the company's facilities in downtown San Rafael.

The company's director of campus planning and design, Char Zamanpour, told the Planning Commission that BioMarin is aiming to start construction on one of the buildings within the next

BIOMARIN » PAGE 6

BioMarin

FROM PAGE 1

six years. It hopes to build the second building within the next 10 years, she said, noting that the company wants to "be ready to build when the need arises."

"For our company, when a drug gets approved and a treatment gets approved, we need to be ready to immediately bring on board space as needed for employees, so this allows us that flexibility," she said.

Whistlestop, in partnership with the East Bay real estate firm Eden Housing, hopes to build a six-story building on the property, reaching 70 feet in height. The organization would operate a senior center on the first two floors of the building, while Eden Housing would own and operate the 67 apartments designated for low-income seniors on the four floors above.

According to Joe O'Hehir, the CEO of Whistlestop, the senior center would include medical facilities and a cafe. It would be "a welcoming central hub for residents and members where they can share meals, attend classes and engage in conversations and activities with contemporaries, all de-

signed to increase physical and mental wellness."

Several residents told the Planning Commission they supported the Whistlestop proposal, citing a lack of affordable housing opportunities for seniors in Marin.

"Affordable housing for older adults is critically needed in this county," said Teri Dowling, a member of the Marin Commission on Aging and the Aging Action Initiative. She called the Whistlestop proposal "progressive and innovative," and said it is "a role model for the kind of housing for older adults we need in Marin."

According to O'Hehir, Whistlestop hopes to break ground on the project this year. The organization has raised the estimated \$10 million needed to build its senior center through private donations, he said. Eden Housing plans to fund the estimated \$38 million construction of the apartments through state grants, and will begin applying for funding if the project is approved by the City Council, he said. If all goes according to plan, he estimates construction of the complex could be complete as soon as 2022.

BioMarin has agreed to donate the land for the project to Whistlestop, according to O'Hehir. The apartments

and senior center would be built on a 15,000-square-foot portion of BioMarin's property.

Whistlestop, in turn, has agreed to give its property at 648 Lindaro St. to BioMarin in a land swap, O'Hehir said. The property, which is adjacent to BioMarin's campus, is used as a corporation yard for Whistlestop. The net property exchange results in a \$1.2 million donation by BioMarin to Whistlestop, according to city officials.

The Planning Commission on Tuesday approved a development contract between the city and BioMarin that would allow the company up to 10 years to build its project. The city has agreed in the contract to freeze impact fees for the development at current rates.

BioMarin is required by the contract to pay San Rafael \$900,000 for traffic flow and transportation improvement projects. An environmental impact study determined that BioMarin's proposed development would likely worsen traffic congestion in San Rafael, generating approximately 2,453 daily vehicle trips.

Commissioner Shingai Samudzi said he is concerned about an escalating traffic problem downtown. But, he said, "I don't think we should halt development

due to that."

"It's really easy to say, 'Traffic sucks, therefore build nothing,'" he said. "We still have to solve the problem. They're putting money up for us to do that."

BioMarin is also required in the contract to create a public plaza, 3,500 square feet of retail space and conference rooms available for public use on its property. The company must fund the creation of a bike lane along Lindaro Street between Andersen Drive and Third Street. And it must complete a \$16 million environmental cleanup of its 999 Third St. site, a former Pacific Gas and Electric Co. property, so that it is suitable for residential use, among other requirements.

The proposed development contract says that BioMarin would no longer be required to create a path along Mahon Creek, which was a requirement imposed on the company in 2015 when the city approved its plan to build a four-story office building at 755 Lindaro St. But the Planning Commission recommended that the city continue to impose that requirement on BioMarin, noting that the path would provide improved pedestrian access to the downtown SMART train station.