

## A Last Look Around?

### Mayor touts site plans for vacant Ward building during tour

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By Tom Tigani

City officials remain hopeful that a \$43 million project to redevelop the former Montgomery Ward site at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Schaefer Road will move forward in the next few weeks.

On Thursday, Mayor John O'Reilly Jr. conducted a tour of the building – which has been vacant since the store closed in 2001 – for members of the local media in an effort to show exactly what developers have been dealing with in trying to come up with proposals for both the building and the site. He also provided them with a booklet chronicling a series of plans for the site, including the most recent one from Redico Holding.

The plan calls for the site to be developed with Oakwood Healthcare System as the main tenant and Midwest Health and Dr. Mark Saffer as a subtenant. A parking deck, coffee shop, bookstore and retail space also have been proposed for the complex; a major national pharmacy and a separate senior housing facility are also part of the site plans.

O'Reilly used the opportunity to reiterate that despite what some City Council members have said about some of the fits and starts of the process, the Redico plans for the site remain “essentially the same” as originally proposed. The new medical facility would occupy about 130,000 square feet, and the retail space would comprise about 20,000 square feet.

The plan also allows the city to recoup the \$3.95 million it paid to acquire the site in 2005 and get it back on the tax rolls after a seven-year absence, O'Reilly said.

Critics have said the developer promised nearly 500 new jobs at the site, but that plans have morphed into a mere reshuffling of jobs from elsewhere in the city. Additionally, they have expressed disappointment that Redico's plans call for the building to be torn down rather than being renovated, saying that a part of the city's history will be lost.

“I have as much affection as anyone for saving it,” O'Reilly said shortly before showing reporters the spot in the building where he once worked as Santa Claus. “But it's more from an emotional standpoint than a historical one.”

He said that the city theoretically could retain the building and preserve it, but that it's not economically smart to do so.

“The problem is, for us as a city, it would be at a great cost,” he said.

During the tour, he pointed out a series of removable weight-bearing columns that scuttled plans from previous developers to turn the upper two floors into a banquet hall or divide it into office space.

O'Reilly also talked about a feasibility study for a minor league ballpark at the site, and how the results of that study showed that as appealing as the idea might be, it would have

been filled only about 40 to 50 nights a year and vacant the rest of the time unless the city could come up with other events to put on there. He also said that such a commitment could detract from other city services.

Redico and city officials say construction would begin as soon as April if Oakwood's Board of Directors approve a plan next month to eventually buy Saffer's practice.