

New hotel in plans on West Main; Planning Board to review project

By Matt Sheley

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MIDDLETOWN — Given the success of their first two hotel projects together, James Karam and Rocky Kempenaar are trying to bring another to Middletown.

The business partners recently filed plans with the town to bring a new 92-room hotel on property they own behind the Clare Dodge Chrysler Jeep dealership at 310 West Main Road.

The proposed \$12 million, four-story hotel would be located within a stone's throw of the partners' two other hotels, the Hampton Inn & Suites and Residence Inn by Marriott.

Karam said they have not signed with a hotel chain yet, but if the project were approved by the town, it would likely be a Hilton or Marriott at a mid-level price range, meaning around \$160 a night during the summer and about \$109 in the winter.

"We wouldn't be doing it if the numbers didn't show it would work," Karam said. "What we've heard over and over again, particularly from visitors at the Residence Inn, was that there's a real need for this mid-level-priced product for all the business travelers and families that are here year round."

"We're beginning the permitting process and a few things have to fall into place," Kempenaar said. "We're very excited about it. After seeing the success of the Residence Inn and the impact that's had, there's no doubt this will work out if it's something the town wants to see."

A hotel project has been talked about off and on since Karam and Kempenaar bought the 3-acre former Ford dealership property in December 2007 for \$3 million.

Since then, the slump in the economy has slowed the timeline on the development proposal, but the Clare car dealership took over the existing building at the intersection of West Main and Beacon Street early last year.

Based on plans presented to the town's Technical Review Committee, Town Planner Ronald M. Wolanski said the developers indicated the hotel project would not have an impact on the Clare car lot.

A packet of information done by Millstone Engineering and submitted to the town outlined everything from the exterior look of the proposed hotel to the layout of the 100-space parking lot, placement of trees and vegetation along much of the property line and high-tech stormwater runoff and treatment system. From an artist's rendering of the new building, the outside of the hotel has a similar feel and design as the neighboring Hampton Inn.

Wolanski said the issue is scheduled to be on the Planning Board's agenda for its session Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. at Town Hall, 350 East Main Road. He said it is possible the Planning Board could make an advisory recommendation about the project to the Zoning Board of Review, which has ultimate say on the plan. Because it's a hotel, the project needs at least one special-use permit from the zoning board to move forward.

"It's been said before that Middletown offers an opportunity for visitors to stay in the area without paying the price of lodging in Newport," Wolan

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This rendering by Millstone Engineering shows the planned four-story hotel on West Main Road in Middletown, behind the Clare Dodge Chrysler Jeep dealership.

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Hotel

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of lodging in Newport,” Wolanski said. “This particular group has had a lot of success with this model.”

According to the layout design from Millstone Engineering, the hotel would be accessed from a new driveway on West Main Road north of the car dealership building. The hotel building would run parallel to the rear property line, with the back of the new building facing Race Street.

Asked if the lot was too small for the project, Karam said there was more than adequate room, particularly when looking at the group’s two other projects in the area.

“With a project like this, you usually need 1.75 acres, which is around the same size we needed for the other hotels,” Karam said. “Everything has been designed to take that into account.”

Karam said approximately 60 people would be employed at the hotel, including full- and parttime positions.

Figures from the Newport and Bristol County Convention & Visitors Bureau indicated there were 1,254 hotel rooms in Middletown, 1,409 in Newport and 31 in Portsmouth.

“The Residence Inn has been very successful for the higherend traveler because of the full kitchen and other amenities for people who are staying in the area for a while,” Karam said. “Whether it’s for four or five nights or the 506 nights we booked for someone who was on a long-term project at the Navy base, it’s definitely filled a need.”

If all goes according to plan, Karam said construction on the project could start next year, with an opening in 2013. Karam said a new shuttle would run from the trio of hotels to downtown Newport, giving guests a way to get to the restaurants, galleries and other attractions without worrying about finding a parking spot.

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This parking lot behind the Clare Dodge Chrysler Jeep dealership on West Main Road in Middletown is the proposed site for a new hotel.

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