

# GREENWICH POST

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## Historic Armory could get high-end makeover

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Staff Reporter

Greenwich residents looking for the latest in luxury living may soon find themselves reaching back to the past.

Last month, developers presented the Planning and Zoning (P&Z) Commission with preliminary plans to construct nine three story town houses at 224-230 Mason St., the site of the former Greenwich Armory and an adjoining parking lot. The design also calls for two levels of underground parking.

According to Brad Nitkin, president of the HB Nitkin Group, which has owned the Armory since 2001, the new town houses would incorporate the building's original facade, preserving the existing streetscape, as well as a piece of local history.

While the front of the building would be restored to its original look, about two-thirds of the Armory would be removed. Mr. Nitkin said the sections of the building that are slated to be torn down are neither historically significant nor feasibly savable.

"I think everybody who's seen what we're doing has been very pleased with what they've seen, because we're maintaining the architecture of a significant structure," he said.

Before going before P&Z, the developer consulted with the town's Historic District Commission (HDC), which supported the town house idea and offered several suggestions as the project moved forward.

"The commission members expressed their pleasure in this plan for adaptive re-use of an historic structure, especially with the restoration of elements to the Armory facade that have been lost over the years," said Susan

Richardson, chair of the HDC, in a letter dated April 18. "The complementary style of the town houses and the mix of masonry materials were felt to be appropriate



Subject to approval from the Planning and Zoning Commission, the former Greenwich Armory on Mason Street could be converted into nine luxury town houses by 2009.

Kenneth Partridge photo

for the historic building and the neighborhood."

The HDC recommended that efforts be made to match the existing brick when walls in the demolished sections are repaired. It also asked that the developers grant the town a preservation easement, ensuring future protection of the facade, which Mr. Nitkin says has been done.

Town Planner Diane Fox said the project has raised several questions that still need to be addressed, however. Most importantly, Ms. Fox said, the developers are looking to expand the site's floor-to-area ratio (FAR) from .377 to .866. She said the increase is significant considering only one part of the Armory, the front, is actually going to be preserved.

"The issue for the commission is, can we give them a .9 [FAR] for a building that doesn't even exist?" Ms. Fox said.

Maximum FAR in the central business district, Ms. Fox said, is .3, with exceptions generally being reserved for those instances where an entire building is being saved and new sections are being added on.

"That's the big hurdle the commission has to get over," Ms. Fox said.

Others include figuring out how to maintain the integrity of the structure while underground parking is built and coordinating the entire project, which has a proposed end date of May 2009, with the construction of the new Public Safety Complex, which will be going on at the same time.

Ms. Fox said there are several other locations in town where builders have been able to convert old buildings into residential units, though she said it's not that common a practice.

"Certain zones lend themselves to it," she said, citing the Riverdale building on West Putnam Avenue, an old industrial structure that was recently approved for condominiums, as one example. She also mentioned an old boarding house next to the YMCA on East Putnam Avenue that was turned into a town house and a school building on Mason Street diagonally across from the Armory that was converted to housing 15 years ago.

Mr. Nitkin said the Armory was nearly chosen to be converted into the new Public Safety Complex

several years ago. When the plan fell through, he and his colleagues began looking at alternate uses. He said he's confident builders will be able to address all of P&Z's concerns and receive the necessary approvals. The application is scheduled to go back before the commission in June.

"It's really an idea that came about in recent times," Mr. Nitkin said. "We investigated what would be the best use for the site, and after seeing what's happening with other residential developments, we felt this was a very good use for the site."

As for the project being like others in town, Mr. Nitkin feels the Houses at Greenwich Armory, as the development is being called, will stand out. For one thing, he said, designers have ensured a high level of craftsmanship by enlisting Robert A.M. Stern, dean of the Yale School of Architecture, to draw up the plans.

"I think this is somewhat unique," he said of their goal to bring new life to the Greenwich Armory by going back to its roots. "We're making an effort to restore the architectural integrity." Mr. Nitkin said it's still too soon to say how much the condos might sell for when they hit the market, but he said buyers will be getting plenty of bang for their buck.

"They are going to get something that's architecturally very significant, and it's going to be built with the highest possible quality," he said. "It's a great in-town location."

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