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Zoning board OKs controversial Olde Towne East apartments

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Ann Heffernan, who has lived for 30 years in a house adjacent to the abandoned lot where Higgins' apartments are planned, sees it another way. "This project is not compatible with the existing character of the neighborhood," she said.

Higgins and Heffernan represent two camps that have mobilized in the past few months over a three-building apartment complex planned for 122 Parsons Ave. in Olde Towne East, a block east of I-71 and a block north of Bryden Road on the Near East Side. The two groups came together in a nearly standing-room-only meeting last night of the Columbus Board of Zoning Adjustment.

After several hours of hearing concerns from both camps, board members approved the project by a 3-0 vote, with Jim Maniace abstaining because he's worked with the developer.

Of the dozens of people who attended, many rose to speak, reciting the years they've lived in the Olde Towne East neighborhood and why they were concerned about the proposal. A least one shed tears. Proponents of the plan emphasized that it would reclaim the 1-acre vacant lot that used to be home to a

carpet factory and is laced with arsenic and other chemicals. They also said it would create a way for new residents to enter a neighborhood known for its 100-plus-year-old houses.

But opponents, often reiterating that they aren't anti-development, said it's too many apartments for an acre, and not in keeping with the historic community.

They also want retail space on the property. Developers have said they tried to find stores to occupy the development's first floor but didn't have any takers.

"I can't stomach the thought of there being something that looks like a dormitory on Parsons Avenue," said Roxy Brown, an area resident. "This won't fit the neighborhood look."

Before the meeting, Higgins, who runs Arch City Development, and other developers met with residents and changed some of the plan to assuage some concerns.

That means the new project budget will be about \$5.5 million and will cut the number of apartment units from 40 to 34; take off one story of the building; and reduce parking areas, Higgins said.

The Olde Towne East Neighborhood Association rejected the development by more than 2 to 1 last week, but the Near East Area Commission, which is recognized by the city to offer zoning recommendations, approved it 6-5 in February.

"There's so much emotion going on in this that I don't think people are being reasonable in what they say," said Mike Moore, a project proponent and member of a group that created a plan for the area in 2010.

City planners recommended that the complex be approved, saying it's consistent with the 2010 development plan for the neighborhood. But the same plan also says that "purely residential buildings on this site without any retail use are not supported" and "retail uses are the highest priority."

"It's like you're dropping something that doesn't belong there into the neighborhood and it's stuck there forever," said Craig Dransfield, owner of a business two blocks from the site. "I don't think the high density is going to be a

good thing.”

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