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Fillmore to bring 'Broadway feel' to city

Developer unveils plans for music club and hotel projects in Silver Spring

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

The developer of the proposed Fillmore music club in Silver Spring hopes to open doors in September 2011, an aggressive timeline that begins Tuesday with the community's first, long-awaited glimpse at plans for the venue and adjacent office and hotel projects.

The 28,000-square-foot Fillmore music club will break ground in October and open in September 2011 on Colesville Road if the developer, Lee Development Group, and the operator, Los Angeles-based concert promoter Live Nation, have their way. It's a "very expedited, aggressive" approval and construction schedule after seven years of negotiations to bring a music venue to Silver Spring, said Bruce Lee, president of LDG.

"A lot is still changing as we speak," Lee said Tuesday from his office at the corner of Colesville Road and Georgia Avenue in Silver Spring.

The Fillmore plans will be submitted to the Montgomery County Planning Board March 1 with an expected public hearing this summer. Gaining the necessary approvals and building permits for the plans, a process that can take years in Montgomery County, will be jammed into a "massively complex and condensed" six-month timeline, Lee said.

Conceptual plans for the Fillmore will be first presented to the community Tuesday, in advance of submission to the Planning Board. Those plans include a three-floor music venue with a standing-room capacity of 2,000 people and the option to install seating for events like community meetings, business conferences, stand-up comedy and children's performers, Lee said.

The first floor will contain a lobby and general admission viewing area, the second floor a balcony with potential seating and a basement level will have bathrooms and a private area for performers, Lee said. No parking for the Fillmore will be located on site.

Live Nation, the world's largest concert promoter, is designing the venue in stride with other Fillmore locations it owns or manages in places like Denver and San Francisco. The construction budget for the Fillmore is \$8 million, the combined amount the state and county will contribute to the project, Lee said.

Once the building is constructed, LDG will officially donate the land to Montgomery County in an innovative yet-controversial agreement finalized in November after more than a year of negotiations.

In exchange for the donated land, LDG will have 15 years to build an adjacent office and hotel project, and may do so under current land use rules without the risk of future planning officials or zoning rules forcing changes or delays. LDG donated the land, valued at around \$3.5 million, as a public amenity for the office and hotel project. Generally, an amenity would be provided once a developer starts a project.

The office building will front on Georgia Avenue and offer "class A" office space, the highest quality available, in a 220,000-square-foot, 10- to 12-story building with five levels of parking, including three below ground, Lee said. That building will be located next door to another "class A" building, the 150,000-square-foot, LDG-developed Lee Plaza, and a separate developer will build a "class A" office building at 8621 Georgia Ave.

A planned hotel facing Fenton Street will be nine- to 11-stories tall with about 190 rooms, Lee said. The office and hotel plans will go through the approval process along with the Fillmore as one project, but will not be constructed until tenants are leased and market conditions improve.

"Instead of taking two years to get through approval and another to get building permits, we could walk into the permitting office once we have a tenant," Lee said of the office and hotel. "Montgomery County has a reputation of not being business-friendly and taking too long to go through the process. This allows us to be more competitive because we can move more quickly.

"It's ridiculous that it usually takes four to five years for a project like this to come to fruition."

When LDG and county officials appear before the planning board some time this spring, it will be the first time the board has reviewed the project since summer 2008, when it recommended against the land-use provisions that made the Fillmore possible. The provisions, originally proposed by County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) and eventually passed by the Montgomery County Council, stripped the board of its discretion to accept a public amenity if it is a property offered for arts and entertainment use.

"There was great concern with the zoning text amendment," Rose Krasnow, chief of development review for the county's planning department, said in a phone interview Tuesday. "At the same time, that was passed, and the board is usually good at recognizing something that has passed should be reviewed as what's in front of them not what's happened in the past."

Lee is banking on that approach, especially because any hiccup could mean missing Live Nation's imposed deadline of fall 2011 – a prime time for opening a music venue – to open the Fillmore.

Live Nation owns or operates more than 140 venues worldwide, has comprehensive management deals with artists like Madonna and Jay-Z and recently began its own ticket-distribution service. The company is in the final stages of a proposed merger with Ticketmaster, but the potential music industry giant has been held up by anti-trust concerns. The proposed merger has not affected plans for the Silver Spring Fillmore, Lee said.

Live Nation signed a \$3.26-million, 20-year lease with the county in Jan. 2008 after about six years of negotiations for a music hall in Silver Spring. The county had previously considered a Birchmere music hall, drawing the ire of the independent music industry, when it unexpectedly chose Live Nation for the lease.

"If it's open and fair and a level playing field, we are all for that," Audrey Schaefer, a spokeswoman for Bethesda-based music promoter I.M.P., which owns the 9:30 Club in Washington, D.C., said of the Silver Spring Fillmore. "But what Live Nation is getting in this gift from the taxpayer is not open and fair."

I.M.P. opposed the deal between the county and Live Nation when it occurred because of its cost to taxpayers, calling it a "sweetheart deal" and claiming I.M.P. was shut out of negotiations for a music club once Live Nation showed interest. With the Fillmore, a venue that should be very similar to the 9:30 Club, fast approaching, Schaefer said I.M.P. won't change the way it operates the popular D.C. club.

"We've always operated thinking we've got competitors," Schaefer said in a phone interview Tuesday.

But having a music industry giant like Live Nation added to the Colesville-Georgia area already inhabited by the American Film Institute and Discovery Communications will add a "Broadway feel" to Silver Spring, Lee said. And just as AFI helped land Discovery in downtown Silver Spring, Lee hopes the Fillmore will produce a second wave of arts, entertainment and media options in one of the state's few designated arts and entertainment districts.

And does he hope the Fillmore could help him land a Discovery-type tenant for his office building?

"We're looking for a top-notch tenant," Lee said. "To donate a valuable piece of land is a serious risk on our part."

Montgomery County officials and representatives from Lee Development Group and Live Nation will present plans for the Fillmore music club and the adjacent office and hotel project being built along Colesville Road before they are reviewed by the Montgomery County Planning Board. The meeting will be held 7 p.m. Tuesday at Lee Plaza, 8601 Georgia Ave. in Silver Spring. If the county government is closed Tuesday due to inclement weather, the meeting will be held on Feb. 25 at the same time and location.