

Leaders looking for flair Proposing makeover for business district

By Christopher Rowland Globe Staff

Downtown Framingham positively bustles with its mix of Brazilian restaurants, Asian clothing outlets, insurance agents and merchants selling cell phones and pagers.



Town Leaders, though, say something is amiss. The business district has a shabby look, they fear. Too few young professionals live downtown. There are no trendy boutiques, no Starbucks.

So, they have seized on an unusual, potentially risky plan for a town-financed, \$49.5 million construction project designed to bring upscale flair to Framingham.

While acknowledging it exposes taxpayers to the winds of market forces, they are asking town voters to share in a grand vision: Rising like a colossus behind the Memorial Hall Municipal building would be a five-story municipal and commercial complex. It would contain a second municipal building of glass and concrete, plus 18,000 square feet for restaurants and retail stores, 45,000 square feet of commercial office space and 53 residential apartments arrayed on the top floors.

Memorial Hall itself, with its neo-Classical facade dominating the town's main traffic circle, would get a much-needed face lift. Two commercial buildings on Concord Street would be purchased by the town and demolished to make way for the project. A two-level underground parking garage with 525 spaces would complete the package.

Once built, town officials say, the "municipal campus" would work as an economic magnet, attracting private investment to nearby buildings and ultimately leading to a complete transformation of Framingham's image.

The Newton architect who advised the town and drew up the proposal, Hisham N. Ashkouri of ARCADD, Inc., said he does not know of any project like it in size or scope. He is working with Dracut and South Portland, Maine, on smaller projects that mix government and commercial uses. But otherwise, he said, the Framingham plan is unique.

The endeavor represents a major roll of the dice in a volatile real estate market, taken by a Board of Selectman and town officials who have not been known for bold gambles in the past. If it fails, it could prove an embarrassing and costly drain on taxpayer money. But, if successful, it would be a major coup for advocates who say suburban living does not have to take place in cars and on ugly shopping strips.

Young professional couples could stroll from their apartments, shop on downtown thoroughfares, dine at outdoor cafes. They could walk to the Framingham MBTA commuter-rail station and take the train to jobs in Boston.

"If you believe in downtown—maybe the town has to show the way," said Selectwoman Ginger Esty, a principal visionary behind the plan.

"I think the other buildings will be converted and come into line if we show it can be done successfully."

The town has decided to forgo a traffic study or even a formal market study, and the administration hopes to present the concept to Town Meeting in January. If Town Meeting approves, it would appear on the April election ballot as Proposition 2 1Ú2 override.

The minimum cost of the general obligation bonds used to pay for construction would be \$78 per year for the owner of a \$200,000 house, for 22 years. In effect, rent from the commercial development would subsidize the renovation of Memorial Hall and construction of the new municipal school administration building. Costs to taxpayers would rise if vacancies rose.

An earlier plan to finance part of the project with the revenue bonds backed by the rental income has been scrapped, said Town Manager George P. King Jr., an enthusiastic supporter of the project. "Revenue bonds on such a speculative project may be very difficult to sell," King said. He acknowledged the town is assuming a significant risk by tackling such a large real estate project, but said the risk is outweighed by the potential reward of a revitalized downtown.

Officials chose not to perform a detailed market analysis, he said, because, "even if [demand] isn't there, we have to make it there." "It's creative. It's thinking outside the box. That's something that hasn't happened before," he said. "As noble and as helpful as it

is to open up a coffee shop or a dress store, those kinds of stores will not redefine our downtown."

In one sense, the plan was born of frustration. Town Meeting approved new mixed-use zoning throughout the downtown business district last year. The goal was to encourage developers to spruce up retail shops along Concord Street and Union Avenue, and rehabilitate the upper stories for apartments and professional offices. Planning officials say there has been some interest, but no deals have been struck. Although public debate has not begun, there appears to be plenty of ammunition for skeptics.

The timing alone could be a major problem, with the economy stagnating and layoffs striking EMC, Cisco, and other high-technology employers. The town has about \$128 million in outstanding and expected bonded indebtedness. Another \$49.5 million—if that is the final price—would bring the town much closer to its debt limit of \$212 million.

Esther Hopkins, a member of the Board of Selectmen, while counting herself a supporter of the project, said she does not believe this is the best time to present it to Town Meeting. "I think it's a very good idea, I don't know if this is the time we're going to be able to do it. I would be hesitant with the way the market is," she said.

Doug Freeman, the Republican Town Committee chairman and a Town Meeting member, said he has heard from both skeptics and supporters in recent days. "I've heard the term boondoggle, so I don't think there's a confidence level that people think it's a reality," Freeman said. The Finance Committee, an arm of representative Town Meeting that is charged with studying spending proposals and making recommendations, will be taking a close look at the project in the months to come, said Chairman Charles G. Taylor. The state of the economy is definitely a concern, he said.

"In boom times, when you've got plenty of money coming in—you just have a more optimistic feeling," he said. "When the economy starts to sour, I think people tend to pull back a little bit and look more carefully at big projects with a little more of a jaded eye."

But Esty said construction companies might submit more favorable bids during an economic downturn. Among the features of the project that she cited would be the view of Farm Pond from the fifth-floor residential units. She drew a comparison to some of Framingham's neighbors in the western suburbs, like Wellesley, with its new police station and boutiques and gift shops, and Natick, with its gleaming new municipal complex.

"So, why shouldn't have a top-notch Memorial building complex?" Esty said. "We're not as good?"